

# MEMORYSCAPES: AMERICAN ART AND THE TENSION OF TIME

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Utah  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Utah

August 2011

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**The University of Utah Graduate School**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis looks closely at the phenomenon of “landscape,” arguing that in art, a landscape acts as a network of cultural codes and ideologies made visible. These values are put on display not as an innocuous pursuit, but rather in the attempt to enact a kind of cultural colonization; landscapes do persuasive work as a means of convincing others of what matters most. As artifacts, these landscapes are imagined views that, while they may make reference to actual places, say more about the artist or community’s grounding principles than the actual natural character of a space. My work here will focus on the way that landscapes reveal particular anxieties, most notably the anxieties over the intersection of memory and place.

This thesis focuses on two landscapes in particular, the work of nineteenth-century American painter Thomas Cole and Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road*. The discussion of Cole focuses on the concern the artist felt for the direction the nation was going spurred by Jacksonian politics. This fear of a growing empire’s strength is coupled in Cole’s *Course of Empire* series, with a nod to the allure of progress, especially the frontier ethic that dominated nineteenth century America.

The discussion of McCarthy’s novel focuses on the way that memory and history become a grounding set of principles that attempt to resist the violence of an apocalyptic world. These protective memories are born out of a character’s relationship with the

landscape he travels through and the way that it recalls a lost world. *The Road* argues that though this longed-for world cannot be regained, it nevertheless provides an opportunity for a family to pursue what they believe to be noble ends: survival, persistence, even violence.

Both landscapes illustrate American anxieties about the shape of the future in light of the past. Memory is enacted in sometimes idealized, sometimes terrifying, often contradicting depictions of the natural world made political.

*To Catharine*

“Foolish people think that what they  
imagine is somewhere else. That stuff is not  
made in any factory but their own.”

—Thoreau, *Journal* November 1, 1858

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	viii
INTRODUCTION: IMAGINED MEMORIES .....	1
Chapter	
1. THE LANDSCAPE OF ANXIETY: <i>THE COURSE OF EMPIRE</i> AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY NATIONALISM .....	20
Landscapes of Contradiction .....	23
Fearsome Future, Nostalgic Past .....	38
Sublime and Shoreless Scenery .....	44
The Divine Plow .....	46
An Old World Apocalypse .....	53
2. "THE ASHES OF THE LATE WORLD": THE PROBLEM OF MEMORY IN <i>THE ROAD</i> .....	57
Ashen Memories .....	59
The Story of Goodness .....	66
The Chain of History .....	69
Memories of Little Boys .....	73
The World in Its Becoming .....	78
CONCLUSION: THE ANGEL AND THE STORM .....	81
REFERENCES .....	86



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1. <i>The Savage State</i> .....	29
1.2. <i>The Pastoral State</i> .....	31
1.3. <i>The Consummation of Empire</i> .....	33
1.4. <i>Destruction</i> .....	35
1.5. <i>Desolation</i> .....	37

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to many people who helped and supported and inspired me during the process of writing this thesis. First, I am tremendously grateful for my patient committee of advisors: Professors Stephen Tatum, Melanie Rae Thon, and Joseph Metz. They have been a wellspring of encouragement and ideas that have helped me tremendously to work through some tough places in the process. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the Environmental Humanities department—students and faculty alike—for their intellectual support and for their friendship. I will be forever grateful for the support of my family, especially my wife Catharine and daughter Kay. Of course, this project could not have been accomplished without their willingness to make the necessary sacrifices along the way.

## INTRODUCTION

### IMAGINED MEMORIES

Rewind yourself to your earliest memory. No matter how dim the recollection is, that memory is probably linked to a particular place or a setting of some kind. Places, even places briefly visited, have a kind of “stickiness” in our memories that allows them to remain long after seemingly more pertinent details have faded. Surprisingly, remembered places sometimes carve out a more substantial niche in our minds than the names and faces of our loved ones, the important words we might have said or heard, or even the timing of the events remembered. Try this little memory exercise: Where were you on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001? What about your first kiss?

While place may maintain prominence in both our individual and cultural recollections, there is at the heart of this phenomenon a gnawing concern over the accurateness of these remembered places, a concern that stems from the ambiguous structure of memory. People today often think of the human memory as a kind of archive where experience resides until it needs to be recalled, almost like a bank vault. Similarly, we talk about computers in terms of how much “memory” they have—how fast they are at recording and processing information. Or sometimes, we think of memories as a filing cabinet where information is stored by category. When we remember we simply open the desired drawer and rifle through the dusty files. But ancient analogies about memory

illustrate the way that memory is far more imperfect than we sometimes believe, especially when we consider that despite attempts at systematizing memory, recollection is inevitably an ability that fails us.

For instance, Plato thought of the memory as a kind of wax tablet that life was written upon, the impressions of the tablet available for review by way of recollection. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates asks Theaetetus to imagine “that our minds contain a block of wax, which in this or that individual may be larger or smaller, and composed of wax that is comparatively pure or muddy, and harder in some, softer in others, and sometimes of just the right consistency” (qtd. in Rossington 25). According to Plato, when we want to remember something, “we hold this wax under the perceptions or ideas and imprint them on it....Whatever is so imprinted we remember and know so long as the image remains; whatever is rubbed out or has not succeeded in leaving an impression we have forgotten and do not know” (25). For some people the block of wax will be soft and easily impressed, and for others there will be a real struggle to retain any kind of impression life has to offer. While the quality of the wax may be important, what seems more significant to Plato is the ability of the then relatively young technology of writing to record experience, implying that knowing how to chisel impressions into wax could lead to a more accurate system for remembering. Despite the effectiveness of recording impressions, the analogy of the wax tablet has certain drawbacks that illustrate the true nature of memory—an illustration that Plato himself might have overlooked at the time. The problem with this concept of recollection is that in order to access the recorded information, someone needs to read the tablet. While the wax may take an objective imprint of life, reading tends to foul things up; it is the interpretation of the data that

inevitably leads to the possibility of misunderstanding the marks, misreading them in light of present circumstances, or even intentionally falsely reading the tablet. The arbitrary experience of reading and interpreting a record presents some real problems for any kind of claim to objectivity that memory might make.

Plato's analogy of the wax tablet teaches us that memory can be accurately thought of as an artificial system, one that is affected either consciously or subconsciously by human skill, something less like a science and more like an art. In reality, all memories are made by the process of recalling the past in light of present circumstances. The neurologist Oliver Sacks has written about our imperfect yet creative memories thus: "It is characteristic of a creature, in contrast to a computer, that nothing is ever precisely repeated or reproduced; there is, rather, a continual revision and reorganization of perception and memory, so that no two experiences...are ever precisely alike" (qtd. in Sutton 275). Memory is not so much defined by its ability to record the past as writing would, as it is by its ability to revise and alter the past, smudging out the wax tablet and rewriting things as it were. In fact, some memory scientists have made the claim that the most accurate memory we could ever retain is the one that we never think about—the one that stays dormant and lost, and therefore unaltered, by the effects of recollection.

Because of the arbitrary and even artificial character of memory, we must assume that remembered places are just as much a creation as any other memory. I don't want to toss aside memory as a useless function—even if it is not completely objective it still has a powerful impact in our individual lives, one that can be the foundation for our deepest held beliefs, even our identity. Rather, I am trying to set the stage for the remainder of my

argument by acknowledging that invention is inevitably part of recollection, and that memories of places are therefore the products not of their physical makeup but rather the meanings our imaginations bestow upon them. My recollections of my hometown will be demonstrably different than those of my neighbor, or even of my parent or sibling due to the effect our own individual experiences have on refiguring and recreating our consideration of a place.

Memory is always a part of the present, and therefore affects the way that we think about the places we inhabit and the views we encounter. Our past experience is often what allows us to recognize certain landscapes for what they are—and also to orient ourselves within them. In his essay “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory,” David Lowenthal writes:

We selectively perceive what we are accustomed to seeing; features and patterns in the landscape make sense to us because we share a history with them. Every object, every grouping, every view is intelligible partly because we are already familiar with it, through our own past and through tales heard, books read, pictures viewed. We see things simultaneously as they are and as we viewed them before; previous experience suffuses all present perception. (5-6)

We carry history with us wherever we go—the elements of any landscape that stand out or resonate with us are those that we have experience with, that have some kind of comforting familiarity. But just as our history is always an active part of the present, so too does the present affect the way that we think about the past. Lowenthal writes that memory “adjusts recall to current needs. Instead of remembering exactly what was, we make the past intelligible in the light of present circumstances” (27). This conceptualization argues that memory is always both actively influential and actively played upon—it alters our experience in the present while simultaneously being altered itself.

For the ancients, memory was an art. Around 90 B.C. an ancient textbook called *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was published by a now-unknown author. The treatise offered a system of learning persuasion in a highly structured and therefore easily-remembered way. The author includes in the text this affirmation that memory is a talent that can be taught and cultivated: “I am satisfied that there is an art of memory” (Rossington 43). The author continues to outline a system whereby rhetoricians can memorize significant quantities of information, a mnemotecnica founded on the ability for the memory to retain places and images. As recorded in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the method suggests “loci” or places as providing a feasible foundation for a memory to be built upon. An individual should first imagine what the text calls a “background,” “a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like” (44), that can then be filled with images that represent ideas. For instance, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* explains that “if we wish to recall a horse, a lion, or an eagle, we must place its image in a definite background” (44). The theory then is that when we want to recall the information we have hoped to memorize, we simply need to imagine walking through the house and looking at the images we have placed there. The crucial issue for the *loci* method, however, is that we choose the right representative images that will stick easily in memory’s recesses. In particular the images must be sufficiently uncommon—images should be

as striking as possible;...not many or vague, but doing something; if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we dress some of them with crowns or purple cloaks...so that the likeness may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them...so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too, will ensure our remembering them more readily. (Rossington 47)

*Rhetorica ad Herennium* marks the beginning of a powerful connection between memory and the imagination. Specifically, in introducing the idea of a mnemonic system

built upon *loci*, this influential manual links memory, imagination, and place. This link marks a shift from Plato's conception of the wax block to a system of memory that places emphasis on the imagination's ability to connect images and ideas. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes in his book *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, that the mnemotechnics advocated by *Rhetorica ad Herennium* "are all to the glory of the imagination, of which memory becomes an annex." "In the same stroke," Ricoeur continues, "spatialization obliterates temporalization....The notion of place has chased away as the mark of the past" (62). The place associated with an idea has now superseded time in terms of significance for recollection—the ancient *ars memoria* makes the noteworthy claim that memories are best recalled when founded on the effective combination of place and image, rather than the attempt to use time or sequence as a guide for remembering. This shift makes memory into something locatable, though not in a concrete way but rather in the imagination. In other words, I can now think to myself, "Oh, I keep that memory over here next to this thought and that image, I'll go and retrieve it." Likewise, I can now think about the shape of memories, that they have a definable look to them.

Because memories are so indelibly linked to the imagination, it is easy to see how our recollections of places are largely invented. This reality in turn provides the opportunity for nations and political groups to alter the way they and others think about themselves. Imagined recollections have a way of enacting political power when a state has the opportunity to recreate its identity in a way that can subsequently subdue others, put down rebellions, and indoctrinate other countries. In other words, both history and memory can result in a type of ideological colonization. In an essay titled "Invention,



Memory, and Place” the critic and theorist Edward Said writes that memory is in fact one of the crucial fuels for nationalism. Recollection, Said claims, has to do with establishing an identity of power and authority. He writes:

Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths, the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory...is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider’s understanding of one’s country, tradition, and faith. (176)

Said’s claim requires that in order for a nation to invent a nationalist identity, memories must also be invented—memories that, like myths, provide rallying points that inspire pride and loyalty. In this way, remembering is a kind of identity invention; memory becomes the attempt to *remember* the far flung conceptions of a place or political body into one unifying whole that a community can rally around. “People now look to this refashioned memory,” Said writes, “to give themselves a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world” (179). In other words: we are what we remember.

These recollected identities shape the way that cultures, countries, and even individuals think about themselves, and are likewise rhetorical devices that influence the way that others think about such communities. Said argues that memory is something that gets *used*—a tool, even a weapon: “The art of memory for the modern world is both for historians as well as ordinary citizens and institutions very much something to be used, misused, and exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there for each of person to possess and contain” (179). Memories are invented as a means of making an argument, an attempt at cultural, philosophical, or religious superiority. As an example, Said reads the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict as stemming from a difference in the way that each party chooses to remember the history of the place they are fighting over. Behind conflicts like those in the Middle East are the ever-present diversions of memory that not

only strengthen the identity of one community and exclude others from that history. The suggestion, writes Said, is that conflict is the product of cultural differences in using the triad of place, memory, and imagination:

Only by understanding that special mix of geography generally and landscape in particular with historical memory and, as I said, an arresting form of invention can we begin to grasp the persistence of conflict and the difficulty of resolving it, a difficulty that is far too complex and grand than the current peace process could possibly envisage, let alone resolve. (183)

The anxieties produced by this “persistence of conflict” is the subject that this thesis will take up, anxieties read through the lens of landscape, memory, and imagination.

Hanging in the National Gallery of Art in Washington is a canvas by the French surrealist Renee Magritte entitled *La condition humaine*. In Magritte’s usual playful way, this canvas shows a painting on an easel in front of a window with the curtains drawn open, the painting exactly aligned to match the scene outside that it depicts. The work nearly defies description: a painting of a painting of a tree surrounded by bushes, propped up in front of a window that looks out onto a tree surrounded by bushes. There is hardly a border around the painting; we can only distinguish the art from the scene itself thanks to the clip of the easel and the vertical white edge of the canvas that interrupts the scene. “This is how we see the world,” Magritte said about the painting. “We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside” (qtd. in Schama 12). While Magritte’s painting may suggest something about how we see, for at least a moment the viewer is stuck wondering not *how* they are seeing, but *what* they are seeing before them. Both Magritte’s painting and his supporting claim get at the root of an issue that philosophers, artists, and environmental conservation

groups have struggled with for the last several decades: What do we see when we look at nature?

Magritte's question is dually complicated by the painting's title. The implied problem is that human perceptions are inevitably separated from what is truly outside the window by the barriers that artificial representations create. In other words, as close as it may come to depicting the natural world, art is inevitably a human construction—a mirror that reflects more on human proclivities, ideologies, and cultural anxieties than the actual physical character of the more-than-human-world. Historian Simon Schama writes in his book *Landscape and Memory* that

what lies beyond...our apprehension...needs a design before we can properly discern its form, let alone derive pleasure from its deception. And it is culture, convention, and cognition that makes that design; that invests a retinal impression with the quality we experience as beauty. (12)

The concern that Magritte's painting demonstrates over our human isolation from the natural world will be taken up in the two main chapters of this thesis, grounded on an examination of how such worries evolve throughout American history.

Instead of attempting to tackle the philosophical and phenomenological underpinnings of nature as a whole, my thesis focuses on landscape—particularly artistic depictions of the natural landscape—as a means of focusing on the tensions that emerge when nature, memory, and ideology meet. My claim is that landscape is the product of a kind of looking that does psychological and political work—landscape informs national and even individual identity in a way that is both inclusive and exclusive.

It will be helpful to begin this discussion of landscape with a discussion of what the word means. Slipping into the English vernacular by way of the Dutch “landschap,” the corrupt term “landskip” which eventually became “landscape” originally referred to a

painting, typically of inland scenery. Nowadays, the word's meaning is not limited by artistic form, but instead means more broadly a view of an area, what the Oxford English Dictionary calls "the object of one's gaze." In other words, you don't have to go to a gallery to see a landscape—you can simply go for a drive in the mountains. Wherever landscapes are encountered, they are always tied to notions of looking, of the way that people choose to see (and sometimes depict) the world around them. In the introduction to the second edition of his important study entitled *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell describes a triad that is at play whenever we are thinking about landscape. Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau and Henry Lefebvre, Mitchell argues that concepts of space, place, and landscape overlap when we are thinking about the significance of a given location. He defines "place" as a specific location, one that can be noted on a map, for instance. "Space" on the other hand, is not defined by location so much as by the activities that take place there; it is a site "activated by movements, actions, narratives, and signs" (x). And finally, "landscape" refers to a site made visual, or as Mitchell says, a site "encountered as 'image' or 'sight'" (x). In this way, landscape is always a visual product. This definition does not exclude the possibility that a landscape can be recorded in writing, as such descriptions invariably call to mind images not just words.

The question that Magritte's surreal painting poses to the concept of landscape concerns if such a view is something outside/separate from us that we observe from a distance, or if a landscape is in fact something we stand inside of, or maybe even something that comes from inside us. Is a landscape *over there* somewhere? Or is it all around us?

In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams explains that “the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation” (qtd. in Wylie 3). In order to see/depict a vista that would qualify as a landscape it is necessary to select a vantage point typically at a distance and at some height, a point of view commonly taken in eighteenth and nineteenth century landscape painting. In order to be able to look at a landscape we must necessarily be a sufficient distance from it. Cultural geographer John Wylie draws a comparison between this distant, “objective” viewpoint and technologies like microscopes and telescopes that present the world as “an external, separate reality to be rationally perceived and accurately represented” (3). In this way, though landscape is still linked to the act of looking, it is always the object seen, a view observable only because of separation between view and viewer.

But another sense of the word reduces the possibility that the observer can truly be separate from the view she or he perceives. This meaning requires “landscape” to be a verb, a way of seeing the world, not simply the object(s) seen. Wylie writes that landscaping is not just a function of our biological capability to see, but also our cultural ability to draw meaning out of the natural world we might look at. “How we look at things is a cultural matter,” he writes. “We see the world from particular cultural perspectives, the ones into which we have been socialized and educated” (7). This cultural definition of landscape means that an analysis of various cultural products—landscape paintings, landscape writing—can reveal the guiding ideologies of the cultures that produce such artifacts. Likewise, an analysis of landscape has the potential to reveal the ways that such products are always imagined, even if they intend to depict a scene perfectly. Schama writes: “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of

the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock” (61). Here we see landscape to be an imagined view, the invention that takes place when nature is processed through the filter of ideology. In this way landscape is not separate from the viewer, but rather the product of the individual (or culture) and their accepted beliefs. Landscapes, therefore, cannot truly be separate from the viewer. When recorded in paint or language they are, rather, a construction that reflects back upon the producer. In the essay “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” Leslie Marmon Silko writes:

So long as the human consciousness remains *within* the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky, the term *landscape*, as it has entered the English language, is misleading. “A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view” does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow *outside* or *separate from* the territory he or she surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on. There is no high mesa edge or mountain peak where one can stand and not immediately be part of all that surrounds. (265-6)

Silko denies the possibility of true separation from landscape, the possibility that there would be a vantage point sufficiently above or beyond the natural world to be truly “objective.” Instead, viewers of landscape are a part of the world they see, and as a part of that world they have some influence over how it is represented.

In the essay “Imperial Landscape” included in *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that landscape should be thought of as a medium, “a vast network of cultural codes,” rather than as a genre of representation. He writes: “[Landscape] is a material ‘means’ (to borrow Aristotle’s terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values” (14). Landscape is in effect the means whereby meaning is expressed, an opportunity for certain ideas to be

given value, to become almost a guide or template for a set of beliefs or tenets—a template that is sometimes forced upon others in a type of cultural colonization. Walter Benjamin takes up this same depiction of memory as a medium for expression in an unpublished essay entitled “Excavation and Memory.” He writes:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging....Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives us an account of the strata which first had to be broken through. (576)

Benjamin continues to explore the possibilities of memory as a medium, eventually settling on the conclusion that scattered recollections say something about the one who remembers, that our memories, when pieced together could in some way represent our personality, politics, and culture in the same way that an archaeological dig would provide a picture of a people sketched in broad strokes. The danger, of course, is that the “account” recorded in the strata of our memories could be misread, and we therefore would be misrepresented. Again, this is the risk associated with an art as fragile as memory.

In the introduction to *Landscape and Power* Mitchell claims that “Landscape...doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions” (1-2). While it may represent itself as independent from ideological intentions, a landscape enacts power on its culture—shaping the way that members of a community think about their cultural practices and political futures.

Perhaps most importantly, landscapes have an ideological effect on how a community thinks about natural world they are a part of.

Both of the landscapes that I will closely examine in this thesis demonstrate the American anxiety over how the past should influence the future. In the first case, a painter is concerned over how his country should proceed given the lessons offered by the downfall of history's greatest empires. The second example offers an illustration of how much anxiety can be produced when nostalgic memory springs up when an individual thinks about the hopelessness of the future. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur quotes the French philosopher Henri Bergson on the effect of remembering images:

To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream. Man alone is capable of such effort. But even in him the past to which he returns is fugitive, ever on the point of escaping him, as though his backward turning memory were thwarted by the other, more natural, memory, of which the forward movement bears him on to action and to life. (51)

This conflict between the backward movement of memory and the persistent forwarding of progress is at the heart of both examples I examine in this project.

When a painter sets her brush to the canvas—particularly in the attempt to depict a landscape—how much of the overall product can be considered an actual record of the land before her, and how much a construction of her own artistic creativity? If we take Magritte at his word, the answer is that art, as a product of what we see, must inherently be the record of an internal experience. In other words, we paint what we see, and we see what we want to see. I am claiming here that art cannot truly be objective—rather, when we create a work of art we are creating something new and different from the scene



before us, even if our aim is to paint with as much livid detail as possible. Even in the attempt at being a record of a place or space, art is as much a record of ideology as geology.

When this claim is applied to the strong tradition of landscape painting that emerges in America around 1820 and the subsequent popularity of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River school, the American landscape reveals the myths and ideologies relevant at the time: America as an untouched wilderness, America as a New World Eden, and America as a primitive world awaiting civilization. In this way landscape painting becomes a type of archive of cultural identity. These paintings emerge at a time when concern over the economic policies of new president Andrew Jackson and America's spreading development and industrialization was growing year by year. In particular, Thomas Cole's landscape paintings demonstrate an anxiety over expansion coupled with the romantic faith in the sacredness of nature as God's creation and home.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will focus on Cole's series *The Course of Empire*, a quintet of paintings that present the evolution of an imaginary landscape following the effects of both time and culture. Each subsequent painting adds to the argument that nations evolve from "the savage state to that of power and glory, and then fallen to become extinct" (qtd. in Noble 176). At a time in America where there were growing concerns over the power of a market economy as well as the overall effect of growth in cities, Cole's paintings argue for restraint and control of the impulses that were associated with the progress of "empire." The series offers a cautionary reminder of what happens when a culture outgrows itself. In doing so, Cole imagines empire as antithetical to nature, as incapable of sustaining a healthy relationship with the natural world. In doing

so, he also argues that the natural world has sustaining power that should not be overlooked—that even after empire has run its course, mountains and vines will remain, in his view sacred and holy despite man’s failures. In this way, Cole’s series is an example of how even during a time when the nation was moving toward expansion and development, ideology remained that imagined America’s past as a virgin, untouched land—a New World Garden of Eden. In walking forward into an invented past, these works of art demonstrate a type of recollection, even nostalgia that accompanies such moments of cultural and political anxiety.

In *The Course of Empire* we likewise see the competing impulses between preservation and progress. Cole seems an ideal example of nineteenth century American romanticism, an individual who endows his landscapes with the holiness at the heart of the pseudo-religious romanticism of the time. But at the same time, Cole can’t seem to resist the allure of progress, particularly that which will allow America to become the pastoral agrarian idyll so longed for following the country’s founding. There is likewise a tug-of-war between past and future at work in Cole’s paintings. The series argues that America should try to resist making the same mistakes as ancient superpowers, but at the same time demonstrates a strange infatuation with the sublimely chaotic future awaiting the nation at the end of its present course.

Chapter 2 of my examination of landscape fast-forwards considerably from the days in which America was considered new, vibrant, or even Edenic. In his 2006 novel *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy imagines a future America after the apocalypse—some kind of nuclear winter, natural catastrophe, or societal collapse—that has reduced the nation (if not the world) to an ashen “scabland” populated by rogue cells of cannibal

“road rats.” The plot of the novel follows a father and son as they travel on a road south, survival their aim.

McCarthy’s novel reveals the way that imagination animates a landscape by way of memory. As they move along the road, the father tries to reshape the ashen landscape by invoking the preapocalypse world, its natural features, its customs, and especially its myths. This shaping of the world is a desperate attempt at creating a narrative that will lead his family on, a story that promotes—albeit a feeble kind—of hope for the future. The influence of remembered narratives on this family is reminiscent of the description of memory that Silko writes in “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination”:

Landscape thus has similarities with dreams. Both have the power to seize terrifying feelings and deep instincts and translate them into images—visual, aural, tactile—into the concrete where human beings may more readily confront and channel the terrifying instincts or powerful emotions into rituals and narratives which reassure the individuals while reaffirming cherished values of the group. The identity of the individual as a part of the group and greater whole is strengthened, and the terror of facing the world alone is extinguished. (273-4)

Landscape reaffirms certain values for the man and his son, and even becomes a protection for the principles that ground them. They shape themselves in the image of goodness that the father tries to recall from history. Despite his failings, the effort is significant as it provides the opportunity for McCarthy to examine memory’s role in a violent, oppressive world.

The animating work that landscape does is coupled in *The Road* by the way that memory is erased by the sheer violence and trauma of the world. As he was born just after whatever event first unleashed the horrors of the now-apocalyptic world, the son has no real sense of the old world. Because of this difference in experience, the father’s attempts at remembering are often prevented by his son’s vivid understanding of the

hopelessness of their world. Despite his youth, the son is in many ways much more of a realist than his father who travels the road in a constant tug of war with memory, nostalgia, and the imagined possibilities of the future.

*The Road* is many things: an adventure novel, a horrific story of violence and death, a warning of a future in which man has done something horrible to his world. It is also a stark and beautiful description of a landscape blighted by some unnamed catastrophe, a landscape that these two characters live in and map their thoughts onto. This chapter will read McCarthy's postapocalyptic landscape as indicative of another important moment of anxiety in American history, the moment when we reflect upon our own self-inflicted annihilation, the eve of the apocalypse.

While Thomas Cole's paintings are clearly rhetorical in nature, *The Road* is perhaps less obvious of an argument. I want to resist simplifying McCarthy's novel into a cautionary tale of the effects of greed and progress, though I think those elements are certainly there. Instead, this chapter will illustrate the ways that McCarthy's text demands its readers consider what matters most, to answer the question that critic Kenneth Lincoln asks in light of McCarthy's novel: What would you live for, die for, abandon, salvage, save, or carry? I think that precisely because of the way it forces such questions upon its readers, McCarthy's novel—which is certainly not outright hopeful—nevertheless makes an argument for persistence of beauty and mystery even in a world that will “not be made right again” (241).

While McCarthy's novel is obviously an imagined future, it is a story that feels very old—it reads almost like a bare-bones Old Testament narrative. Even in imagining a world frighteningly new and different from today, McCarthy has managed to turn his

reader towards the past, to a world that still has the potential to resist catastrophe. That an imagined future landscape has the potential to move a viewer backwards both in time and in ideas is not surprising given the way that a contemplation of landscape—even a blighted, ashen one—leads to the recollection of that which has been lost. In writing a dark and frightening future, McCarthy has made us consider what we may have already left behind.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE LANDSCAPE OF ANXIETY: *THE COURSE OF EMPIRE* AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY NATIONALISM

On September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1832 the artist Thomas Cole stepped off a boat onto the docks of New York City. He had spent the past two years traveling and painting Europe, bouncing among London, Rome, and Florence. The young painter's feelings must have been mixed about his return to America. Cole had received word that his parents were sick, especially troubling news in light of the recent outbreak and spread of cholera in New York. Despite these concerns, Cole felt some delight in being back in New York. He recorded his thoughts from the day of his return in his journal thus:

The day was delightful: and after a tedious voyage of seven weeks from Leghorn [Italy], it is not surprising that almost everything I saw gave me pleasure. Well nigh a four years' absence made the shores of the bay, its white buildings and the approaching city, very welcome to my eyes. As its roar came across the waters upon my ears, accustomed for so long a time to the sounds and solitudes of the ocean, it was deeply impressive. We had come from the pathless deserts of the sea: this was our first hearing of the mingled voices of the multitude, and the din of wheels and footsteps in the stony streets. (qtd. in Noble 192)

Cole was thirty-two years old. While in Europe, he had learned from the paintings of European masters, and marveled at the sublime scenery he encountered across the continent. His years abroad had been something of a "grand tour" for the young artist; he had exhibited several paintings at the Royal Academy, visited the Louvre, rented a studio

in Rome previously occupied by Claude Lorrain, and visited some of the most impressive landscapes in Europe—including Mount Vesuvius. In general, the trip was artistically productive for Cole—he sent ten major paintings back to the United States in 1832 alone.

Now back amid the “mingled voices of the multitude” in New York, Cole rented an apartment and gallery space at 1 Wall Street at the heart of what is now the financial district of Manhattan (the beautiful art deco Bank of New York Mellon Corporation skyscraper now stands where Cole took residence). It was during this time that Cole made one of the most important connections in his career as an artist, an event that his biographer the Reverend Louis Legrand Noble called “the harbinger of a friendship which influenced his success, as a painter, far more than any other” (Noble 175). One day an old man entered Cole’s gallery, quickly made his way around the room and left without saying anything. Noble claims that Thomas Cole was a good judge of character, and he saw something special in the old man, something meaningful in the way that he hesitated in front of each canvas. In the weeks later, Cole was formally introduced to the elderly gentleman, who turned out to be Luman Reed, a wealthy merchant from the upstate Hudson Valley who had made a tremendous effort throughout his life to support the arts in America.

Reed was drawn to Cole’s work, and commissioned from him a large Italian landscape. Reed’s large collection of paintings hung in a special gallery in his home at 13 Greenwich Street close to the battery at the southern tip of Manhattan. Almost a year after Cole returned from Europe, Reed approached him with the possibility of designing a special series of paintings to be hung in that gallery. In a letter to his new patron dated 18 September 1833, Cole expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to fulfill a long-term

artistic hope: “I mentioned to you a favourite subject that I had been cherishing for several years with the *faint* hope that, some day or other, I might be able to embody it. Your liberality has presented an opportunity” (qtd. in Noble 176). Cole proposed a series of landscape paintings depicting the rise and fall of an imagined empire, each painting composed from roughly the same angle on a landscape—the series following one particular natural view throughout the course of several generations. In the same letter, Cole described the project thus:

A series of pictures might be painted that should illustrate the history of a natural scene, as well as be an epitome of Man,—showing the natural changes of landscape, and those effected by man in his progress from barbarism to civilization—to luxury—to the vicious state, or state of destruction—and to the state of ruin and desolation. (qtd. in Noble 176)

Cole’s intent was to illustrate cultural evolution in a way that no single static painting could, the series becoming a kind of panorama that would allow a viewer to see how an imagined civilization would evolve over time. The concept at the root of the series is that cultures begin in romantic primitivism—a popular form of cultural philosophy that fueled not only American art, but also the nation’s political and religious ideals—and then proceed to evolve through various stages of political and cultural expansion. Cole’s assessment of such a philosophy is typical of the time: “nations have risen from the savage state to that of power and glory, and then fallen, and become extinct” (qtd. in Noble 176). But culture is not singular in this type of evolution, according to Cole. Rather, nature likewise changes at times—“the hours of the day and the seasons of the year”—a connection with the natural world that could be used artistically to match the changes of a civilization. Reed enthusiastically embraced the proposal and agreed to fund Cole’s work. Cole had finished the first two paintings by the



end of 1834. In 1835, while he worked on the third and largest canvas of the five planned paintings, Cole selected “The Course of Empire” as the title for the series, likely drawn from Reverend George Berkeley’s poem “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” which includes the lines:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its way,  
The first four acts already past,  
The fifth shall close the drama of the day,  
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.

Like Berkeley, Cole chose to represent time proceeding in five acts, and arranged his series so that there would be natural transitions between each image, the climactic third painting (which hung above Reed’s fireplace with the other four paintings flanking it on both sides) being considerably larger than the other four. Each painting transitions to the next by including some element that directs the viewer’s eye to the right—usually a figure looking, pointing, or striding in that direction, signaling the observer on to the next painting. The series is likewise connected temporally, as the course of the action seems to take place over the course of single day; the first painting set at dawn, the second mid-morning, the third at high noon, the fourth towards dusk, and the fifth mid-evening (Wallach 90).

### Landscapes of Contradiction

His time in Europe had shown Cole the sublimity of the European landscape, and the mountain scenes he saw during his time living in Italy particularly captivated him. He was, however, less impressed with the quality of European landscape painting than with the actual landscape itself. With the exception of Claude, whose work Cole adored, many European landscape painters struck Cole as perhaps too focused on skill and not focused

enough on style. Following a visit to the British master J.M.W. Turner, Cole made note of his concern over his observation that in European art “the means seem a greater object of admiration than the end,—the language of art, rather than the thoughts which are to be expressed” (qtd. in Noble 116). For Cole, imagination was the spark for a painting—particularly the flights of imagination that nature sparked in him. In that same note he complains that in much of art, “the conception, the invention, that which affects the soul, is sacrificed to that which merely pleases the eye. Painting now is more ingenious than true and beautiful” (qtd. in Noble 116). In reality, technique was never Cole’s strength as a painter. Instead, Cole’s philosophy embraces emotion as the catalyst for a work, and this outpouring of feeling is obvious both in his compositions as well as his technical choices, particularly his loose brushstroke and consistent use of chiaroscuro.

In order to best embrace the emotive possibilities of landscape, as in many of his other paintings Cole abandoned any concrete connection to a specific place in *The Course of Empire*. Instead, in this series Cole imagined landscapes that would best match the emotion he hoped to convey. In this way, an invented landscape becomes the canvas upon which Cole can paint emotion. In many ways, the opportunity to execute a painting which could appeal to and engage the imagination through a broad series of symbols or allusions was for Cole the primary appeal of landscape over what were generally referred to in the nineteenth century as “historical paintings.”

Because the paintings in *The Course of Empire* were in fact rhetorical devices arguing for a particular view of civilization’s future, Cole’s landscapes are carefully composed so that their final form supports the intended function. In a lecture entitled “Thomas Cole and the Romantic Landscape,” Walter L. Nathan explains:

Cole never treated his landscapes as delineations of particular scenes in a topographic sense. They are ‘composed’ landscapes, free transcriptions into the language of a romantic poet. Line, form, and color work together to create a picture which does not exhaust its significance in their pleasing arrangement, but evokes a distinct mood. (35)

Cole spent most summers living in the village of Catskill, 120 miles north of New York City up the Hudson River. He began his time in Catskill renting a small studio, but after meeting and marrying Maria Bartow, a resident of Catskill, he established a home at Cedar Grove, a property belonging to Maria’s uncle John A. Thompson. While his early work did in fact include paintings of specific locations around the Hudson Valley, the scenery he encountered during that time proved to be more fodder for Cole’s imagination than the literal subject of any number of paintings. In 1838, two years after *The Course of Empire* was complete, Cole wrote a letter to his friend and fellow painter Asher B. Durand that included this statement: “I never succeed in painting scenes, however beautiful, immediately on returning from them. I must wait for time to draw a veil over the common details, the inessential parts which shall leave the great features...dominant in the mind” (qtd. in Roskill 233). Cole’s work is rarely an objective representation of a particular place or scene, no matter how stunning that landscape might be. Instead, his paintings appear far more interested in culling the impressive elements from a variety of scenes in order to be a composition capable of sparking the viewer’s imagination and calling to mind a wide range of emotional, spiritual, and philosophical associations. In other words, Cole’s paintings were more much more about feeling than representation. For this reason, Cole often painted from memory instead of *en plein air*. Delaying the time of painting until certain details could fade in his memory required Cole to rely upon imagination in constructing a picture.

As well as activating the imagination, invented landscapes like Cole's are likewise able to simultaneously display contradictory philosophies and open themselves to a wide range of interpretations, as will be clear in my analysis of *The Course of Empire*. Art historian Allan Wallach refers to the way that, for Cole, landscapes were a kind of psychological arena, what Wallach calls "a symbolic domain in which thwarted and deeply conflicting emotions could play themselves out" (64). In the case of *The Course of Empire*, the conflicting emotions concern the character of the nation and the tensions at play between America's history and its future. Professor Bryan Jay Wolf, in his book *Romantic Re-Vision* argues that by embracing nonrealistic yet sublime landscapes, Cole's work is driven not by the hope of achieving an accurate portrayal, but rather the need to work out inner conflicts. The psychological work that the artist performs while painting is as equally sublime—both terrifying and exhilarating—as is his final landscape. In other words, the intense theater of *The Course of Empire* is an artistic construction, but a creation that draws its intensity from the intense psychology at its foundation. Wolf argues that Cole's landscapes "draw their energy from the drama of the psyche in the struggle of self-definition, and they reach into the uniqueness of an *American* topography only as that topography reinforces their own aesthetic or psychological needs" (178). In other words, Cole's landscapes—despite being devoid of actual referent—are in fact the artist's attempts at working out his feelings about America, as well as thinking through how America should represent itself. The tension at play in the series is indicative of the tension mounting in American culture at the time of its creation. The Jacksonian era in America was a moment of commercial success, increased political power, and improved and expanding infrastructure (Stansell and

Wilentz 4). Yet, as Christine Stansell and Sean Wilentz have commented, this cultural moment was one rife with contradictions: the continuing inequality among the races despite growing democratic fervor, the increased distrust of America's moral health despite its financial success (4). Stansell and Wilentz summarize the cultural moment thus: "The political and material advances of the period were genuine. They developed, however, out of passionate conflicts over what the United States stood for and what its destiny ought to be. The price for these advances, many believed, was appalling in human suffering and cultural chaos" (4). The 1830s were a time when, like a teenager, America was sorting out its identity and deciding which direction the new republic should go in. This time of identity construction naturally came with important tensions that Cole astutely observed and allegorized in his series.

*The Course of Empire* demonstrates a fear of what the future might hold for America, that much is clear. What is much more subtly visible in Cole's philosophy and art is the inability to fully shake off the allure of progress. What sets my scholarship apart from that of others who have studied Cole is that I read his work as simultaneously afraid of and surprisingly anticipatory of the future of America.

*The Course of Empire* begins with a picture of America as wilderness. Cole believed that civilization began in a state of near-chaos, a time when nature's elements were fierce and unbridled, especially in comparison to the relatively small population of the time. Cole proposed the opening painting, titled *The Savage State*, this way in a letter to Luman Reed:

The first picture, representing the savage state, must be a view of a wilderness—the sun rising from the sea, and the clouds of night retiring over the mountains. The figures must be savage, clothed in skins, and occupied in the chase. There

must be a flashing chiaroscuro, and the spirit of motion pervading the scene, as though nature were just springing from chaos. (Noble 177)

The finished product (see Figure 1.1), which now hangs with the rest of the series in the collection of the New York Historical Society, looks largely like Cole's original plan, a scene of wild grandeur and motion. At the center of the painting is a rugged mountain peak, emerging from a shroud of storm clouds being blown off to the right of the painting. The sun illuminates a massive boulder at the mountain's peak, a feature recognizable in each of the next four paintings. Mingling with these drifting clouds is smoke from a campfire built at the center of an aboriginal settlement. This scene is balanced nicely by the left of the painting, which consists of a copse of gnarled trees and jutting roots. These trees draw the viewer's eye to the most important element of the painting, a wild man, dressed in furs and carrying a bow. The hunter is chasing a fleeing deer seen leaping a rocky stream.

Following the completion of the series, Cole described each painting in a pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition. About *The Savage State*, Cole writes that the painting illustrates "the chase" as "being the most characteristic occupation of savage life" (qtd. in Parry 156). Indeed the central focus of the work is the hunter, his bow aloft, his gaze focused on his elusive prey. The figure's motion matches the scene through which he runs, as there is great activity everywhere—the blowing of the trees in the wind, the clouds gliding off the mountain's peak, even the roots of the trees don't quite seem static. Clearly, Cole's conception of the beginnings of civilization is one built around activity. In contrast to the reclining individuals in the following image, early man is—perhaps out of sheer need for survival—up and doing the work that will provide the spark for civilization. In chasing his deer, the hunter is not only providing for his family,



Figure 1.1. *The Savage State*. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, [Object # 1858.1].

but also establishing an identity for himself. In this type of early work, man has created for himself a vocation, one that gives him a purpose and identity. The hunters of savage America represent just the beginning of the ways that Cole argues that civilization is built on the backs of laborers.

Savage though he may appear, the hunter Cole has painted as the prototypical early man is endowed by the artist with some refinements indicative of civilization's influence even in its nascent days. For one, art historian Elwood C. Parry III has astutely written about the classical basis for this hunter, pointing especially to the influence of Reubens's *The Government of Marie de' Medici* which includes a portrayal of Apollo posed in nearly the exact same pose—stepping forward with his bow extended—as Cole's hunter (Parry III 156). Likewise, it is not only his classical pose that gives this early man sophistication, but also by the suggestion that, despite the necessity of the hunt, life for him consists in more than crude killing. This suggestion is supported by the fact that his gaze points the viewer to the right of the painting where the hunter's community has assembled around a fire in their camp to dance and sing. Cole's caption to the painting explains, "Two of the fine arts, Music and Poetry, have their germs, as we may suppose, in the singing which usually accompanies the dance of savages" (Parry III 156). Cole argues in this painting and its accompanying caption that a seed of the arts was present at the beginning of civilization, even in the moment when the empire is mostly associated with savagery and hunting.

This mix of labor and arts carries over to the second painting in Cole's series titled *The Pastoral State* (see Figure 1.2). While the pastoral has philosophical underpinnings in ancient Greece, the American arts canon embraces the pastoral in a way





Figure 1.2. *The Pastoral State*. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, [Object # 1858.2].

that few other cultures have. The false yet widely-accepted nineteenth-century belief in America as a “new world”—a continent newly discovered, newly colonized, newly emerging from the wilderness—makes for an easy intellectual leap backward into the continent’s imagined “virgin” past. The nostalgia so present in the pastoral turn back to an idyllic natural state is made easily available by what many nineteenth-century Americans considered America’s short history. The scene features a wide range of characters and occupations from the soldiers coming out of a gully at the left of the painting, to the reclined musicians at the right of the scene. Of course, this would not be a pastoral scene without a shepherd, and Cole has included a young shepherd taking care of his flock in a meadow that in the previous painting was a tangle of underbrush. Civilization seems to be gaining intellectual steam as represented by the philosopher working out some mental tangle in the dirt. Religion is also included in the scene as represented by the Stonehenge-like temple that seems to have replaced the circle of aboriginal dwellings. Civilization has shaped the landscape, as evident by the way that much of the scene has been cleared of brush, the trees cut so that they nearly align in a shaped row, and the stream covered by a rough stone bridge. Perhaps the most violent and ominous sign of humanity’s influence is the tree stump in the right foreground whose heartwood has been spiked, a not-so-subtle reminder of the violent impact of mankind on nature.

*The Consummation of Empire* (see Figure 1.3), the third and largest picture of the series, shows Cole’s imagined culture at its pinnacle of power. What once was a verdant valley and open bay is now a bustling city<sup>1</sup> hmgf "y kj "dwnf lpi u"cpf "r gqr ng0





Figure 1.3. *The Consummation of Empire*. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, [Object # 1858.3].

purple. In contrast to the first two paintings of the series, the scene is surprisingly filled with people, great crowds filling every available space—even the roofs of the buildings. Everyone is lavishly dressed in robes of crimson and white. A grand procession crosses a bridge, led by the emperor riding on an elephant, draped in a red robe and wearing a golden crown. The only natural feature left visible in this third painting is the same recurring mountain peak, this time viewed from more of a profile. Nature has been subsumed by architecture, as the city's buildings have been built over the harbor's natural features. In fact, with the exception of the mountain peak that somehow remains just out of civilization's reach, the only visible natural elements are now decorative—the potted plants, the statues of lions, and the deer that bounds away from the hunter frozen in the pediment of the temple at the painting's left. Empire has made nature into art, but has ironically also built art—the grandiose statuary and architecture of the bustling city—over top of the once wild and then verdant scenery.

The pomp of the third scene ends abruptly as storms have returned for *Destruction* (see Figure 1.4), the fourth painting in the series. Chaos reigns now, the once stately crowds now a teeming mass of fighters flinging themselves at each other. The bridge over the bay has crumbled in the exact spot where the Emperor once sat, and bodies hang on in desperation to what remains of the crossing. A massive statue of a warrior dominates the foreground of the painting, his broken shield thrust forward and his muscles straining as if trying to enter the fray. The warrior's head has broken off and lies shattered on the ground below him, an allusion to the way that the brutality of war defies reason (Miller 31). The statue includes a broken tree stump at the warrior's side, yet another reminder that nature has been reduced to artificiality. The hills behind the once





Figure 1.4. *Destruction*. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, [Object # 1858.4].

glorious colonnade are lit by flames leaping up into the sky, their smoke mixing with the storm clouds brewing above the tip of the ever-present mountain peak. How quickly things have gone awry. While the pinnacle of civilization's successes may have been an afternoon of pomp and glory, the evening has brought with it death and carnage. "Luxury has weakened and debased," Cole writes in the caption accompanying the painting. "A savage enemy has entered the city" (qtd. in Parry III 181).

*Desolation* (see Figure 1.5), the final painting in the series, stands in stark contrast to the action taking place in *Destruction*. The final scene of the series is a nocturne; the moon has risen over the now calm water of the bay. Clouds are drifting off to the left of the painting, and the sky is a pale blue. The city is now mere ruins, decades removed from its years of glory. The foreground of the painting is dominated by a lone marble column, still largely intact, though now with the added accessory of vines growing up its side. Vegetation is returning to the scene, as shrubs and trees have sprung up among the rubble. Where there were once jostling crowds, the scene is devoid of occupant except for one lone bird perched at the column's top and a pair of tiny deer silently stepping among the debris near the water in the middle ground. The scene is dominated by an eerie feeling of calm, and it is easy to imagine the soundtrack of sublime silence that must accompany such a landscape. Cole describes the painting as "the funeral knell of departed greatness, and may be called the state of desolation" (qtd. in Noble 178). Especially compared to the overwhelming activity taking place in the previous painting, the stark absence of movement is haunting.

This final scene of desolation completes Cole's rhetorical device. The painting crowns the argument that wealth and luxury will bring hubris and the deadly





Figure 1.5. *Desolation*. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, [Object # 1858.5].

disassociation with nature, eventually resulting in the destruction of a civilization. As I argued toward the beginning of this chapter, there can be little question that Cole's intent was to create a five-painting panorama that would instill in his audience concern over the future direction of America, in particular a future that would transform the nation into an empire. Cole is especially concerned over the possibility of a civilization losing touch with the natural world, or in some way failing to live within the bounds of consumption that nature set. Interestingly, Cole concludes his series with civilization in ruin but nature surviving (if not thriving). Perhaps the philosophy at the heart of these concluding paintings is that a civilization that fails to live in balance with nature only threatens its own well being, not that of nature.

#### Fearsome Future, Nostalgic Past

For Cole, it seems an easy leap from *The Consummation of Empire* to *Desolation*. Once a nation decides to endorse wealth and luxury as achievements worth pursuing, the spiritual strength of the culture is undermined, a failing that erodes the very foundation that a nation is built upon. Cole felt as if America in 1833 had nearly reached its “consummation” and that the nation was dangerously close to achieving the same fate as his imagined culture. Cole's painting is couched in a rhetorical structure that places expansionist culture as antinature. In a community reaching the height of luxury, nature—once wild—has been reduced to art, a cultural product that is given a value outside of the intrinsic value that nature offers. Again, Cole argues at the climax of his series that culture builds over nature, the “consummation” of an empire causing nature to be overshadowed.



*The Course of Empire* makes clear that Cole was anxious about the increasing influence of Andrew Jackson, who by 1833 was in his second term. Cole's own politics most closely align with Jackson's political opponents, the Whigs, who advocated an economic model that would allow for an increase in collective national wealth, while limiting the power of individuals in the state. According to Angela Miller, Cole was perhaps most unsettled by the shift the nation's economy had taken in recent years towards a model that fostered unrestrained growth for individuals (71). She writes: "[Cole's] most pointed criticisms were directed not at the accumulation of public wealth but at the transgression of the ordained limits that nature imposed upon economic activities, at the behavior of the citizens of the empire, and at the relationship between the rulers and the ruled" (71). With this analysis in mind, it seems likely that what Cole hoped would disturb his audience most about the scene taking place in *The Consummation of Empire* was not necessarily the wealth visible. Rather, what Cole hoped would prove shocking was the way that the city had overgrown its bounds, and that nature had largely been erased from the scene, replaced by an unnerving focus of individual accomplishments as represented by the lauded emperor.

The inclusion of the emperor is almost undoubtedly a jab at Andrew Jackson. Writes Miller: "In the eyes of the political opposition to Jackson, his imperious and arbitrary style of leadership made him a modern-day Caesar, prepared to manipulate the citizens of the republic for his own corrupt and self-serving ends" (71). For the Whigs, Jackson was close to a tyrant—unwilling to listen to the needs of true Americans, lost in the pompous reveries of a system that would benefit only those who agreed with him politically.

Cole's religious beliefs also made him fearful of the course that he saw America speedily traveling. A devoted Episcopalian, his Christian faith was deeply grounded in the belief that nature was the divine creation of God and a gift bestowed his children on earth. In this way Cole's beliefs aligned with what Perry Miller calls the "Christianized naturalism" popular in nineteenth-century America. This belief maintained that thanks to the sacred character of nature, experience outdoors could teach religious principles to the humble (Novak 3). This faith in nature's divinity was strengthened by Cole's knowledge of British romantic poets like Wordsworth and Keats (Wallach 64). Like these European thinkers, Cole saw nature as the spark that would not only inspire the poet—in his biography Noble wrote that Cole "was always the poet, when he was the painter" (80)—but also sanctify him.

For Cole, the divine could be experienced in the wildness of nature. In a poem simply called "The Wild," Cole wrote:

O, for an hour  
 Upon that sacred hill that I might sleep,  
 And with poetic fervour wake inspired!  
 Then would I tell how pleasures spring like flowers  
 Within the bosom of the wilderness;  
 And call from crumbling fanes my fellow-men  
 To kneel in nature's everlasting dome,  
 Where not the voice of feeble man does teach,  
 But His, who in the rolling thunder speaks,  
 Or in the silence of tenebrous night  
 Breathes in his power upon the startled ear. (qtd. in Noble 64)

But in 1833 when Cole began *The Course of Empire*, wilderness in America was disappearing thanks to the nation's steady commercial expansion. In part, this expansion came as a result of a move away from smaller family farms to more industrialized commercial farming (Stansell and Wilentz 6). As a result of the shrinking amount of

wilderness, Cole imagines a history for America that makes both the country's landscape and population wild.

The romantic nostalgia that results in this refigured history is most visible in *The Savage State*. The painting displays a kind of romantic primitivism prevalent in nineteenth century America, a contradictory philosophy that, while stereotypically figuring aboriginal man as wild and savage, nevertheless maintained that early civilization lived in a kind of harmony with nature—a harmony drawn from life physically and spiritually dependent upon nature. Likewise, nineteenth century popular culture depicted aboriginals as having a type of mystical connection to the earth, a spiritual naturalism which imagined native communities as both savage and spiritual—both wild and dangerous and yet mystical and wise. In this regard, Cole's painting demonstrates a tension typical of his day: the consideration of aboriginal peoples as sublime in their wildness and yet revered for their (imposed) spirituality. The myth of the “noble savage” is one which domesticates a minority group—most often aboriginal in nature—by reducing an otherwise varied and vibrant culture into a series of stereotypes that are then appropriated and spread throughout popular culture.

There is in *The Savage State* and perhaps in the rest of the series taken as a whole a longing for, and almost a jealousy of the savage life. It is a longing for the natural sublime—an opportunity to live in a world where nature could terrify or inspire and yet man can survive and even have some of the comforts of community. It is a longing sparked by nostalgia, the longing for an imagined past, that suggests that wild nature is now lost in modern life, consumed by the controlling forces of empire. Somewhat surprisingly, Cole's series seems jealous of the life of a savage. To enjoy a wild life, and

yet to have the benefits of music and arts seems the ideal combination to Cole's romantic sensibility. The hunter, savage though he may be, seems very closely aligned with the mythic romantic poet, the solitary figure inspired by and dependent upon the gifts provided to him by nature.

In *The Savage State*, Cole has painted a decidedly American scene. Some will say that an imagined landscape negates the possibility of its being linked to any one nationality or sensibility; however, I see even the invention at play in the painting as being unambiguously American. The wildness of the scene, the way that the landscape seems raw and unpolished embraces the sensibility of a nation that prided itself on its irascibility. Only a few decades separated from the revolution, America was still proud of resisting the constraints of the British Empire and winning its freedom. The young nation was now shaping its own character. A crucial part of this identity-shaping was the task of embracing the country's own natural and cultural landscape, both of which helped instill a growing sense of nationalism, a pride for what made America different from Europe. In *The Savage State* Cole embraces the sublime wildness of "unpopulated" America as offering a character far different from that of the Old World—a landscape intimidating yet mystical, beautiful yet dark. The cultural pride that such a distinctive landscape instilled was not limited to the political realm, but extended into the art world as well. Some critics of the day had suggested that scenes depicting the northeastern United States could never compete with the overwhelming history—the nobility and prestige—embedded in European landscapes. Such criticisms of America were grounded in the belief that the ancient character of Europe—the fantasy of crumbling medieval castles and scattered Roman ruins surpassed American scenery in beauty. And yet, such

arguments simultaneously overlooked the long history of culturally rich ancient aboriginal cultures present on the American continent well before white settlement. By way of contrast, Cole firmly believed that the art world needed to pay attention to the unique character that the American landscape offers to artists.

In 1836 Cole recorded his philosophy concerning the American landscape in a piece of writing titled *Essay on American Scenery* published in the first issue of *American Monthly Magazine*. In the essay Cole describes the art world's skepticism of the American landscape thus:

There are those who through ignorance or prejudice strive to maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful...that being destitute of those vestiges of antiquity, whose associations so strongly affect the mind, it may not be compared with European scenery. (7)

In response to these criticisms, Cole writes that artists should remember that “nature has shed over *this* land beauty and magnificence, and...although American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe” (7). Whatever anxiety Cole might have felt over America's lack of history is overshadowed by his faith in America's unique characteristics, the incomparable heights of its mountains, the variety and expanse of its forests, and the power of its rivers and waterfalls. Likewise, Cole argues that whatever the American landscape might lack in signs of history, it makes up for in potential for the future. Still coming into its own, American art in the nineteenth century was about the future, and looking to that hopeful future for an opportunity to establish a unique reputation.

### Sublime and Shoreless Scenery

Prevailing in the first decades following the founding of America was the philosophy that the new nation was unbound in its potential, as if it were an expanse of untouched wilderness simply awaiting the refining touch of cultivation. This belief in America's potential to offer unlimited resources appealed to artists as much as it did to explorers and land prospectors. An essay published in *Knickerbocker Magazine* demonstrates this faith in America's artistic potential:

To the observer of nature our country presents a boundless and magnificent variety of charms. Valleys of quiet beauty, where hamlets are reposing in plenty and peace...streams that steal in murmurs through the underwood; torrents that rend the rock, and dash through all impediments;...These, with the rugged grandeur of her unreached mountains and untamed wilds, nature has lavished in inexpressible affluence around us....How the patriot's heart should bound, and how his eye must kindle as it glances at the vast extending prospect of our land! (qtd. in Lesley 205)

In his *Essay on American Scenery* Cole wrote that compared to Old World landscapes that constantly made reference to their own history, "American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future" (16). This argues that American scenery activates the imagination in a way that points towards the nation's future shape—a shape that is no doubt glorious and full of political, economic, and even artistic accomplishments. In fact, Cole argues in the same essay that it is exactly the landscape's lack of associations with the past that allows for American scenery to be sublime. He writes:

He who stands on Mont Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the West, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, *may* experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man. (16)

Here Cole claims that it is not antiquity that suggests sublimity. Instead, the truly sublime landscape is one that bears no marks of habitation, control, or safety. The potential terror of the American sublime comes in part from the fear of the unknown, the unexplored. Cole argues that while the “gigantic” marks of age may be lacking in America, it is the undocumented nature of such scenery that lends the landscape a far higher degree of awe than the heavily impacted European one. Ruins, which Europe is so famous for, imply a long history of human interaction within a landscape, and as a result do not offer the same sublimity for Cole as the ahistorical, unbounded, even “shoreless” American scene. For Cole, the American landscape has the ability to call to mind an unlimited number of mental associations, in part because—like Cole’s paintings—the landscape is not bound by the need to represent history. In this respect Cole yet again privileges the imagination over tradition.

In this way, it is both the unknown past and the great potential of the future that gives America artistic respectability. Cole remarks in the same essay that the American landscape—“sanctified” by the struggle for independence—includes “many a mountain, stream, and rock...worthy of a poet’s pen or the painter’s pencil” (16). This landscape is described as already endowed with qualities deserving artistic attention, and simply waiting for the artistic community to take advantage of its beautiful vistas. Even in its nascence as a democracy, the American landscape has features that deserve—even invite—the ennobling touch of poetry and painting. In a journal entry that records a journey to North Mountain in the Catskills, Cole writes about the area’s great artistic potential:

The painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other; all nature here is new to Art. No Tivoli’s [sic], Terni’s, Mont Blanc’s...hackneyed

and worn by the daily pencils of hundreds, but virgin forests, lakes and waterfalls feast his eye with new delights...hallowed...because they had been preserved untouched from the time of creation for his heaven-favoured pencil. (qtd. in Wallach 51)

Cole's argument suggests that American artists are divinely favored to live in a country that has such a bright artistic future. This version of America, characterizes it as a place where there are sublime scenes yet to be discovered, let alone depicted. In Cole's vision of the future for the American arts, the landscape that is "new to art" should be put on canvas, what Allan Wallach refers to as "aesthetic pioneering," (51) another kind of labor—this time a cultural cultivation.

### The Divine Plow

Cole's avowal of America's potential signals a subtle yet important shift in his thinking about the future. As mentioned before, I read Cole's philosophy in general and *The Course of Empire* in particular as arguing that progress and consumption should be checked in order to remain in harmony with nature's divine influence. However, I think *The Pastoral State* marks a moment where Cole's mind seems at least open to the possibilities progress offers. If anything, while inspired by the impressive potential of American scenery, Cole succumbs momentarily to the allure of the aesthetic (and even economic) progress the future offers, thereby demonstrating the way that his series never fully casts off the expansionist attitude of the day.

The historical conception of the pastoral is typically understood as the hope of achieving, what Leo Marx, author of *The Machine in the Garden*, calls "a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'"(6). Such an ideal lifestyle is often marked by a prevailing attitude of leisure or repose mixed with poetic



contemplation. Marx argues that the impulse to achieve a pastoral life is fueled by a psychological drive to resist the constraints of civilization—to embrace nature over culture, and simplicity over complexity (Marx 9-10). It is no wonder then that Cole, who loved to escape the bustle of Manhattan for the tranquility of Catskill, and who believed so firmly in nature’s ability to refresh the mind and spirit, would embrace the pastoral mode as representing an ideal America.

It is somewhat curious then that Cole’s painting engages with the pastoral in a far different way than does classical art. Yes, *The Pastoral State* does include some of the standard features that Marx identifies as pastoral—the shepherd and his flock, the verdant setting, the musicians reclining in a meadow. Yet, far more than in other versions, the American pastoral as embodied by Cole’s painting is interminably linked to the concept of work, particularly the work of pushing forward the frontier.

Near the center of the composition is the shepherd leading his flock, but there are a variety of other laborers in the scene—the soldiers marching back to camp, the philosopher no doubt working out some tangle of complex ideas while resting on a stump, and even the child at the lower right of the painting is posed in a position of work, intently focusing on his drawing (which ominously happens to be of a soldier). Most significant among the figures in the painting, however, is the farmer in the background working his bayside plot of land. In this tiny husbandman, Cole has introduced a decidedly American character—the individual sufficiently at home in nature to use it as a source of living. This figure represents what R.W.B. Lewis in his book *The American Adam* calls “a native American mythology” that positions the westwarding frontiersman or farmer as “a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a

new history” (qtd. in Wolf 81). This is the American Adam, divinely commanded to “till the ground from whence he was taken” (Genesis 3:23), so that he might work for the welfare of his family. Ecofeminist Annette Kolodny argues that the nineteenth century frontier impulse is based on the fantasy of being “Adam and Eve, turning wilderness or prairie into a communal garden of domesticity” (qtd. in Buell 34). Whereas pastoral texts were historically dominated by scenes of amorous hillside lounging or the simple pleasures of philosophizing in the shade of a tree, the American nineteenth century pastoral reflects the way that in this relatively new country, life is built around working the earth and transforming it—by the sweat of your brow—into something domesticated and productive. In this way, work has become part of the American religious experience, a frontier spirituality that embraces work as capable of bringing us back into God’s presence. The farmer with the plow becomes the mythic figure that nineteenth century America holds up as the ideal citizen and even the ideal believer—a true patriot who shows his love for country and for God by helping the land flourish and bring forth food. In the nineteenth section of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson writes:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. (164-165)

Jefferson argues that agriculture does not only cultivate the physical sustenance of the nation, but also provides the enlivening virtue that America needs in order to remain chosen and blessed by God. In effect, those who choose to work the earth perform a sacred obligation on behalf of their countrymen. Like Adam and Eve, the early laborers that Jefferson lauds are the spiritual parents of America’s culture of work, providing the example of sacrifice and diligence that would become a crucial part of nineteenth century

America's identity. The inclusion of work's divinity in Cole's pastoral painting suggests a transformation of classical ideals into beliefs that become the basis for the American national character.

*The Pastoral or Arcadian State* demonstrates the artistic and philosophic tensions at hand during the early decades of the nineteenth century in America, particularly tensions between the country's past and future. The impulse to look backwards—to yield to the nostalgia for a serene and peaceful coexistence with nature—was prevalent during this time, especially in artistic circles like Cole's that were so heavily influenced by romanticism. There's almost an effort to force or invent memories of a quaint and rural America. This impulse to look backwards, however, is met with the American faith in labor—the infatuation with subduing wilderness and transforming it into a “productive” landscape—a belief that is ever looking forward towards the progress available to the country.

Cole demonstrates this tension between a longing for pastoral simplicity and the allure of a progressive future built on labor's efforts both in *The Pastoral State* and in his *Essay on American Scenery*. Near the essay's conclusion Cole writes a rather lovely description of America as a pastoral scene:

Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that secluded valley, begirt with wooded hills—through those enameled meadows and wide waving fields of grain, a silver stream winds lingeringly along—here, seeking the green shade of trees—there, glancing in the sunshine: on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers—from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. (16)

Without a doubt, this scene represents the perfect world for Cole—it includes no sense of danger or filth, and reads like the ideal integration of nature's beauties and civilization's. Again Cole depicts America as a place approximating the Garden of Eden,

a connection that he makes in no uncertain terms at the end of the essay when he writes that “We are still in Eden” (17). It is hard to imagine a place in nineteenth century America—or at any other time period, for that matter—that could qualify as such an idyll. Cole proceeds to explain that American nature offers up feelings of “peace, security, and happiness,” feelings it can inspire in viewers only because it is free from the need to measure up to history’s demands. From this discussion of America’s idyllic, and perhaps divine character, Cole quickly shifts to a discussion of the country’s potential. Surprisingly, Cole seems to advocate the position that nature—especially wilderness—might need improving. He writes:

In looking over the yet uncultivated scene the mind’s eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil. (17)

Though this sentiment lasts only a brief moment in an essay that argues against a version of progress that would denigrate nature, Cole’s momentary forecasting of America’s future is nevertheless telling. He once again reaffirms the small figure in the background of *The Pastoral State* as an American hero—he who will drive out all fear (as embodied by the wolf) and bring forward a more secure and prosperous future. The eradication of wildness will allow for progress to run its course, helping America evolve into a landscape of “temple and tower” like that of *The Consummation of Empire*. But what “mighty deeds” does Cole think will the progress bring? Suddenly gone is the anxiety that *The Course of Empire* seems to express over America outgrowing its natural limits. Both Cole’s painting and writing demonstrate an evolution in the depiction of the proto-American from the wild hunter to the plowman. This shift indicates something of the hopes of nineteenth century America, particularly that the nation could become

something cultivated and refined in its own way. This is a shift from savageness to civility, but also from a figure that embodies the unbridled American wilderness to one with obvious ties to Old World agrarian traditions. The farmer with his plow is the embodiment of America's potential. Cole's great fear, however, is that somehow that farmer's virtue will be corrupted by empire's vices and that wealth, luxury, and violence will debase and destroy America. In this way, Cole seems torn between the future and the past—simultaneously embracing the memory of America as wild and the possibility of its becoming a cultivated culture worthy of the same “mighty deeds” found across the Atlantic.

Pastoral nostalgia for a verdant, simple, existence and the pseudo-religious American quest for industry combine to paint a picture of a national sensibility pulled in two temporal directions. Lawrence Buell argues that, in part, these conflicting impulses are created by the conceptualization of America as pastoral. In his book *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell writes that the pastoral mode offers

on the one hand, the centripetal pull of consensualism that threatens to draw the radical text over into the sleepy safe domain of nature's nationism, the ho-hum pieties of American civil religion; and, on the other, the centrifugal impulse always incipient, though usually contained within modest limits, for pastoral to form itself in opposition to social institutions of whatever sort. This duality was built into Euro-American pastoral thinking from the start, for it was conceived as both a dream hostile to the standing order of civilization...and at the same time a model for the civilization in the process of being built. So American pastoral has simultaneously been counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored. (50)

I think both Cole's writing and painting embody well the oppositions at play in the pastoral. At first blush, a painting like *The Pastoral State* seems to argue for a radical withdrawal into nature, a disavowal of the need for economic expansion in America. And yet at the same time, the invocation of the American work ethic as well as Cole's written

glorification of the transformation awaiting American wilderness marks this moment as succumbing to the allure of the institutionally sponsored progress of Jacksonian America.

In reality, nineteenth century America would withdraw into romantic nature while simultaneously westwarding the frontier. This time period represented the blossoming of industrialization in America, the opportunity for rural areas to make financial connections with nearby metropolitan areas, creating a new link between the rural landowner and the urban factory manager (Stanfell and Wilentz 6). Likewise, more and more land was being consumed by the nation's increasing urbanization, pushing the frontier further and further westward across America. At least at the start of the nineteenth century, progress was conceptualized as the opportunity for the country to achieve something of its full potential, to use the nation's resources to grow economically, and in turn to grow spiritually. There was in America at the time the attitude that progress had no real bounds and that a kind of American millennium was close at hand. Thomas Jefferson wrote the following in a letter to a John Adams dated 11 June 1812:

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. I am eighty-one years of age, born where I now live, in the first range of mountains in the interior of our country. And I have observed this march of civilization advancing from the seacoast, passing over us like a cloud of light, increasing our knowledge and improving our condition, insomuch as that we are at this time more advanced in civilization here than the seaports when I was a boy. And where this progress will stop no one can say. (qtd. in Miller 142-143)

This “philosophic” journey Jefferson proposes is exactly what Cole undertakes in *The Course of Empire*, beginning with America’s wild and romantic infancy, and then shifting to the agrarian pastoral where philosophers mingle with soldiers and farmers, each working to assist the “advance of civilization.” Jefferson depicts the course of progress in nearly religious terms—a sanctifying influence that ennobles and inspires the American people, something that improves the character of even the nation’s “semi-barbarous citizens.” The light of progress described here is no doubt the same that shines from Cole’s glistening plow. While Cole certainly fears that what light progress brings to the nation will be snuffed out once America becomes weakened and debased by luxury and wealth, he, like Jefferson, nevertheless feels a kind allure of progress’s possibilities.

### An Old World Apocalypse

Jefferson claims not to know where the course of American progress will end. But Cole is more confident than Jefferson in saying that progress, at least as represented in *The Course of Empire*, inevitably leads to destruction and desolation. In effect, progress signals the beginning of civilization’s apocalyptic end. *Desolation*, as the final stage in empire’s course is the state of ruin that allows for the regeneration of nature. For Cole, this final scene marks the end of one cycle of history and the beginning of another, the opportunity for culture to return to a state of natural harmony, humbled by the catastrophe that has befallen humanity.

While *Desolation* represents the outcome of the great violence depicted in *Destruction*, the series’ final painting is nevertheless troubling in how beautiful it is. Of all the paintings in *The Course of Empire*, this canvas is the most lovely—indeed perhaps

the most picturesque. While *Desolation* is not the climax of the series' subject—it did not achieve the central location that *Consummation* did—it is the most artistically accomplished of all five paintings. Subtle though it may be, there is a claim embedded in this canvas that destruction can be beautiful, that the suffering and death of many could in fact result in some kind of terrible beauty. There is an attitude of peace in this painting, a harmony that the rest of the series longs for. Nature here is rewilding culture, restoring this landscape to its original form of tangled vines and underbrush, bounding deer, and in general a nature that is an active participant in the scene. The painting demonstrates Cole's profound belief in cyclical history: though civilizations might rise to power, the cycle of cultural life demands a return—by way of death and destruction—to a life dominated by nature. Miller remarks that even the forms of the ruins seem to blend in to the natural landscape, history becoming “superseded by the cycles of nature” (32). Broken by such apocalyptic violence, history gives way to the refreshing of nature, the earth now entering a time of regeneration and newness.

Interestingly, this final painting of the series is not only the most accomplished artistically, but it is also the scene that, with its ruins, most closely resembles Old World scenery. Because it is intended to be read as a cycle, Cole's series actually moves forward in time sufficiently to wind up imagining a very old condition—empire's course makes America look a lot like Old World tradition. Where once Cole seemed to think that America's lack of history gave it a sublime character, he now seems to argue that America can never fully resist history. In *Desolation*, time is the empire that steadily encroaches on America, the influence that in effect transforms the New World into the



Old. Here we see yet again the tension drawn between history and the future, between the progress of civilization and the lure of nostalgic recourse into nature.

Cole's series illustrates American anxiety over what course the future should take in light of the affairs of the past. For one, *The Course of Empire* demonstrates nineteenth century America's nostalgia for its earliest (and most romantic) days—a longing for the false history of America as a “new” world, a virgin wilderness, or Garden of Eden. On the other hand, the series maintains the American impulse to progress westward, to develop the frontier and push civilization forward into economic, artistic, and political prosperity. *The Course of Empire* reflects a nation's wish to become its own superpower while nevertheless maintaining sufficient ties to the romanticized Old World past. In effect, the series reflects an American anxiety between past and future—the paintings love and hate both.

In this tension we can say that Cole's series achieves an American sublime, an accomplishment that Bryan Jay Wolf describes as unique because of the fact that Cole's work “tells but a single tale. It repeats on each canvas the history of its struggle with older systems of meaning, which it perceives as exclusionary and prohibitive” (178). This is undoubtedly true of *The Course of Empire*, a work wherein each of the five paintings shows Cole wrestling with old ideas—the romantic notions of America as wilderness, the weight of Europe's historical significance—if only to embrace them again before proceeding to the next painting. Cole's contradictions bring to light the anxieties present in the culture surrounding him: the desire for permanence in the midst of rapid change, the lust for progress in the face of nostalgic longing for romantic nature. While *The Course of Empire* may in fact argue that history is cyclical and its motions are set, Cole

nevertheless seems to argue that at this time of great potential as well as great anxiety over the nation's direction, Americans should choose to restore their standing with spiritual nature while it's still possible. Restrain the axe and subdue the plow, if only for the sake of reducing the possibility that the tragic narratives of fallen empires will be replayed on the American frontier.

## CHAPTER 2

“THE ASHES OF THE LATE WORLD”:

THE PROBLEM OF MEMORY IN *THE ROAD*

“We were aware that the visible earth is made of ashes, and that ashes signify something....And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life....Everything has not been lost, but everything has sensed that it might perish.”

—Paul Valéry, “The Crisis of the Mind,” 1919

The epigraph to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s book, *Memory, History, and Forgetting* is a description of a baroque sculpture housed at Wiblingen Monastery in Ulm, Germany. Ricoeur makes this observation of the statue:

It is the dual figure of history. In the foreground, Kronos, the winged god. An old man with wreathed brow: his left hand grips a large book, his right hand attempts to tear out a page. Behind and above, stands history itself. The gaze is grave and searching; one foot topples a horn of plenty from which spills a cascade of gold and silver, sign of instability; the left hand checks the act of the gold, while the right displays history’s instruments: the book, the inkpot, and the stylus. (viii)

These two wrestling figures combine to make a complex image of human time, a mixture of violence and beauty, age and youth, permanence and mutability. The statue argues that time and history are effectively enemies—time seeks to destroy history’s attempts at recording life’s events, while history fights to resist the incessant progress of time, so that the past might have an effect upon the present and future. In Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road*—a novel keenly interested in

the anxieties produced by history's role in an apocalyptic future—we see in dramatic ways the how history and time are at odds. Specifically, McCarthy engages a tradition set forward by philosophers like Ricoeur and Nietzsche that argues that the way we not only write but also simply remember history can have a political and ideological influence on the present. Both philosophers argue in different ways that the present is always bound up with the past in an eternal wrestle—the past is always influencing the way the present unfolds, and the present uses history for certain means, most notably to perform an ideological work in shaping the course of cultures, nations, and even families.

In *The Road*, McCarthy creates an experiment that tests the effects of history under the harsh conditions of apocalyptic violence in order to see the way that individuals resist violence through the ideological work of remembering. The way that the father and son in the novel each wrestle with history reveals how even in a postmodern, postapocalyptic, posthumanity world we are never truly *post* everything. While the world may change and time may move forward, nothing disappears entirely. In fact, *The Road* argues quite clearly that not only is history indestructible, its persistence gives history the same use following the apocalypse as in the old, predevastation world. In McCarthy's novel we see the tension built between the clash of history's constructions and the violence and hopelessness of an apocalyptic future. Most notably, this clash makes clear the desperate failings of memory to transform the present and future into something if not hopeful, then at least livable. Written in a moment when the combined forces of global climate change, expanded nuclear arsenals, and increased influence of terrorist cells have produced a feeling that the apocalypse is nearing, *The Road* demonstrates modern anxieties over the function of history—particularly memory—in a world that seems to be

increasingly embracing chaos. The novel demonstrates this anxiety in two particular ways: First, McCarthy demonstrates the clash between a landscape that constantly evokes memory with the brutal trauma that erases it. Second, *The Road* demonstrates the anxieties produced when certain stories that attempt to provide a moral template—what I will call historically accepted “grand narratives”—fall short of being categorically applicable in light of the ambiguities produced by an apocalyptic world that drains away the possibility of moral living.

### Ashen Memories

In his essay “Dark Adventure: On Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” Michael Chabon, author of the novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, examines the difficulty of writing a book like *The Road*—a story of terminal and universal destruction. The complexity largely stems from the reality that in order to destroy a world, there must be a world available for destruction first. “To annihilate the world in prose,” Chabon writes, “one must simultaneously write it into being” (114). The argument here is that language has the ability to link creation and obliteration, to create a system of meaning whereby signification takes place even as it is being intentionally stripped away by the author. We see this very clearly in the sparse, angular prose McCarthy uses to tell his otherwise vivid story. Divided into sometimes very short paragraphs, the novel reads almost like a lengthy series of prose poems strung together, the plot of the story drifting along between stark descriptions of the gray landscape. Chabon quotes this passage as an example of how McCarthy animates a dead landscape through language: “The country went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias. Trees as dead as any. He picked up one

of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder and let the powder sift through his fingers” (196). Chabon comments: “*Powder, dead*; sure. But those words ‘liveoak,’ ‘pine,’ the somehow onomatopoeic splendor of ‘magnolia,’ still flower greenly in the mind before McCarthy crushes them, and that leaf, which, if ash, must weigh very little, still lies heavy against the father’s hand” (114). In calling forward images and associations in the mind of his reader, McCarthy’s taut and noun-laden language is eidetic—it calls forward the haunting images that remain with the reader.

The landscape that McCarthy creates is not only filled with associations for his readers, but his characters also have a strong imaginative reaction to the sights and sounds they are presented with. Most notably, the father seems beset by the ability of even such a blighted, ashen landscape to call up a stream of memories. Living in the present is nearly impossible for the father in *The Road* as his memory proves too active. Throughout their travels the man is plagued by the reemerging past—memories triggered by an image or sound, the former world bubbling up—sometimes without warning. What we might call “involuntary memories”—to borrow a term from Proust—come most often to the father in response to some kind of view on the landscape. In the early moments of the book the father lies awake listening to the sounds of the woods he and his son cower in. In the terrifying silence he thinks he either hears or sees “the ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again” (11). The ashes that represent the former world are an apt symbol for the father’s recollections—though frail and pallid they nevertheless are carried forth again and again, only to be scattered once more by the rerealization of the world’s horrors.

Frequently, these uninvited or involuntary memories take the form of a particularly pastoral memory, usually a response to the natural setting the father and son find themselves in. For instance, while standing above a dam, he explains to his son about how the place used to help generate electricity to make lights—a concept that is somewhat foreign to a child living after the apocalypse. Immediately after this little history lesson, the father recalls an experience that happened to him “very near this place”:

In that long ago somewhere very near his place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air. (20)

The memory is at once wild—the vision of a predatory bird cutting through the air—and lovely, almost luminescent—the loose plumage trailing through the still air. Such descriptions evoke a wild feeling combined with the pastoral. For the father, these kinds of memories momentarily reanimate the dead and blighted landscape, the sights and sounds of the dead (but not forgotten) world reemerging thanks to the associative power of the landscape.

A similar recollection happens earlier on in the novel when the father remembers the lake near his uncle's farm where as a child he spent a day rowing in the sun. Again, this memory is a pastoral scene of restfulness and leisure—“the slow periodic rack and shuffle of the oarlocks”—combined with a slightly unsettling view of death—“a dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water” (13). This, the father believes is the day “to shape the days upon,” (13) the template that he should use for bringing peace and contentment to the days spent with his son on the road.

In his book *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*, political scientist James W. Booth writes that memory is in fact most present in places that have felt the effects of natural disasters, genocides, societal collapse, places of “deliberate erasure” (85). He writes, “The now barren landscapes are rarely...the end of memory, but rather the locales where it lurks, where it waits to emerge, beckoning us with its traces, unexpected recognition, the sense of absence, questioning” (85). Destruction provides the necessary void for life—a memory, an image that triggers our recollections—from which to emerge. This is what Ricoeur calls “recognizing a memory” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 433), an act often linked to persistent images, those that survive despite a forced forgetting: “The survival of images...consists in a chain of propositions derived by implication from the phenomenon of recognition. Recognizing a memory is finding it again. And finding it again is assuming that it is in principle available, if not accessible” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 433). Ricoeur would argue that the images or objects that the father sees—something as simple as a telephone—make the past available to him. This availability will lead to a variety of uses for history—some constructive, some destructive.

For the father, remembering the past momentarily relieves the suffering of the present. Recollections of days spent with loved ones, of the world how it used to be, are like fantasies that provide momentary escapes from the horrors of the current world. However, these recollections are so beautiful and serene that his realization of the impossibility of recreating such experiences for his son is nothing but tragic. The dreams of the father are the past relived, dreams that qualify more as nightmares based on the traumatic work they do. McCarthy writes how the man realizes that the past can be a very



dangerous influence, provoking the temptation to be lulled into complacency by nostalgia:

He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death....He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (McCarthy 18)

A sign of weakness and potentially fatal distraction, these “siren worlds” of the past terrify the father. He knows that such recollections run the same risks as what Nietzsche refers to as “monumental history” or the over-valorization of the past—namely that the present will fail to measure up. Nietzsche and the father would agree that the most encouraging dreams are those that are grounded in the perils of the present, not the seducing achievements of the past. For this reason it seems as if the father is almost looking forward to the day in which the world’s history will “at last” fade, relieving him of the distraction. Essentially, he realizes the danger of being such a product of the past. He understands that to return to the past is to stop fighting, to give up and let the present struggle for survival end.

While the father may understand the dangers of nostalgia, he is unable to escape the past—the chain of history is already bound tight. He sleepwalks along the road, at times distracted from the dangers around him by the allure of the past: “From daydreams on the road there was no waking” (McCarthy 18). He is most haunted by the memory of his wife:

He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his

hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress (McCarthy 18).

Though described in only three sentences, the memory carries enough psychological force for the man to again consider the suicidal thoughts constantly nipping at him:

“Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and cold and be damned” (McCarthy 19).

This haunting memory combined with the realization that such a pastorally beautiful experience is completely impossible in the world his son lives in is enough to push the man to feel the allure of suicide—of the rest that even damnation would provide. In an essay included in the most recent edition of *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views* about Cormac McCarthy, John Cant writes that the father’s memories make him a kind of romantic poet, inspired by the way that the natural world recalls the past. Cant writes: “The romantic poet...is after all the poet of nostalgia, of memory, of emotions recollected in tranquility” (58). This is one of the remarkable things about *The Road*: it demonstrates that even after the apocalypse memory has a way of shaping the world—in particular, the apocalypse makes nostalgia even more obvious and poignant. Even more significantly, *The Road* surprisingly demonstrates that tranquility (albeit momentary) is achievable after the apocalypse thanks to memory’s recourse.

Of course the recourse to memory can become an addiction, a potent kind of nostalgia that can become leave a person unable to live in the present. In an article entitled “The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” literary critic Tim Edwards suggests that the father experiences the conflicts produced by a growing nostalgia: the inability to square the present world with the idealized world of memory. Edwards writes that the father experiences “a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present; yet

that Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow the seeds of its own destruction” (58).

Edwards suggests that the memories of a preapocalypse seem so unreal, so impossible so as to cause them to self-destruct. Perhaps all that saves the father from a state of permanent recollection is the stark difference between past and present, a difference that allows for the past to be shaken off as totally unrealistic. These experiences with involuntary memory reveal one tension between past and present: the need to forget an alluring nostalgic past combined with the need to remember goodness.

This process of forgetting and remembering happens a second time when the man realizes that his current condition allows for him to focus his entire attention on what matters most to him—the survival of his son. “No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later” (McCarthy 54). Birthed out of his bleak situation is an acute sense of what matters presently. However, just following this avowal of the present comes a recollection of a photograph of his wife, a memory of the world beyond and behind “the hour.” How can the man save his son today while incapable of thinking of anything but the years with his wife? Can he save today while still remembering that perfect day of fishing, the “day to shape the days upon” (McCarthy 13)? And yet, as much as he loves his son, the father does little to forget the past. Rather, he returns to his childhood home—a place that his son finds terrifying—and constantly returns in story and discourse to the world the boy never knew. In some ways, the father invites the haunting memories of the past, seduced by the momentary lightness they provide. Chabon writes: “In his stories, his memories, and above all in his dreams, the father...is visited as poignantly and dreadfully as Odysseus or Aeneas by ghosts, by the gibbering shades of the former world” (118).

While such memories certainly have a real effect upon him, the father knows that these recollections are nothing but fleeting dreams. As much as memory may populate the landscape with pastoral and even beautiful sights, this life disappears as quickly as it appeared. Destroyed by the world's violence and terror, these memories suddenly disappear: "Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day" (21).

### The Story of Goodness

Memories are not the only way that history reemerges on the landscape of the present. In a much more conscious attempt to impact their present wellbeing, the father spends a surprising amount of time on their journey telling stories. On page 7 of the novel, shortly after we have been introduced to the characters of the father and his son, and we've learned that they live in a place that can only be described as "barren, silent, godless," (4) the son asks his father: "You can read me a story...Cant you papa?"<sup>1</sup> (7). The story he tells lasts the length of the novel: a story that becomes the template the family will use to create an identity for themselves. Likewise, these mythic formulations will become a foundation for the family's purpose, and throughout the course of the novel will guide them to make difficult—even fatal—choices.

It is as if the father is an author himself—choosing a setting and populating it with characters. The father opts to tell a very old story, the myth at the foundation of all

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy's prose presents more than a few problems to the critic hoping to quote from the book. For one, the author almost never uses conventional punctuation. Instead of overwhelming this paper with the distractions of [sic] notations, I have chosen to leave McCarthy's text alone and trust the reader to understand that I have quoted verbatim in every instance.

religions, the story of good and evil. His story teaches the young boy about the existence of “the good guys,” those who are “good” and who will do whatever it takes to defeat “the bad guys” in order to survive. It is “the good guys” who are responsible for “carrying the fire,” a vague allusion to some kind of hopefulness that animates their quest. The father has chosen to tell a story that has at its core the idea of morals, of the possibility that there is such a thing as good/bad, right/wrong. But this is where things start to fall apart for the father’s story. For one, how can you speak of morals and meanings when your whole world is physically, emotionally, and spiritually “uncoupled from its shoring” (McCarthy 11) by the sheer magnitude of the violence and destruction before you? Likewise, the father makes little attempt to define his story’s terms. There is little clarification as to what sets apart “the good guys” from others aside from the brief mention on page 116 that people who are good are special because they “keep trying. They don’t give up.” This inability to specify what the “good guys” do/do not do causes problems down the line when the father begins to do things that do not mesh with his son’s conception of what good guys do.

While we may question the shallowness with which the father teaches his son the difference between good and bad, it is easy to understand that in a life driven by the sheer need for survival, there is little room for a complex ethical view. Without the sometimes fragile, often desperate story of good vs. bad, the only sensible option would be capitulation and self-destruction, an option that some characters in the novel accept. In order to fight this gnawing apathy, the father has constructed several grand narratives—“old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (McCarthy 41), that set a pattern or course of action. As McCarthy writes, “Evoke the forms. Where you’ve

nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74). Constantly moving south, carrying the gun, building a fire, these activities are endowed with spiritual significance through the construction of the father’s narrative—they are all part of fulfilling their duty as “good guys”.

Even the boy’s mother, who abandons her child and husband to kill herself, confirms that story is the natural recourse in a world so divorced from meaning and hope. She says, “A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body” (McCarthy 57). The mother describes precisely what the father does for his young son, drawing together the narratives of valor and courage to instill in their family a spirit of perseverance, and even hope. While the wife refers to the father’s shoddy and threadbare stories as nothing more than ghosts, the description also applies to her son—a fragile composite of mythic and religious virtues that the father vows to protect and push along the dark road. In assembling stories that will reward goodness and strengthen courage, the father has in fact given his child an identity to hide behind, something to shield himself with.

It is important to emphasize the fact that the father’s stories are not new stories, but rather old and recollected stories. The narrative the father has constructed for his son affirms historical values—giving preference to courage and endurance, goodness and masculinity, values that history not only remembers but also celebrates. The story of the “good guys” sounds a lot like the tropes taken up by the western literature that McCarthy has spent the last half of his career as a writer stretching and prodding to expose its weaknesses. It is here where we can almost see *The Road* as another of McCarthy’s

western novels that expose the complexities behind the frequently used tropes of the good, moral, righteous hero riding into town to save the world from the bad guys.

### The Chain of History

For the father and his son, the weight of history proves to be the “dark invisible burden” that Friedrich Nietzsche takes up in the second of his *Untimely Meditations* entitled “The Use and Abuse of History.” At the heart of this essay is the claim that history is a chain that binds man “however far or fast he runs” (Nietzsche 5). “Man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past,” Nietzsche writes; “It presses him down and bows his shoulders” (5). The weight of history’s chain forces an individual into a perspective limited by the tyranny of history—only seeing the world in relation to that which has previously happened, “denying and destroying and contradicting itself” (Nietzsche 6) as a result. Memory is a turn backwards away from life in the present, a turn that damages an individual’s ability to consider present circumstances for what they are. With every thought of the past—every consultation with history—an individual is robbed of life in the present. This robbery produces “a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination...that injures and finally destroys the living thing” (Nietzsche 7). The stupefying intoxication produced by historical life saps power from the individual in the present, reducing their ability to control their own life as they desire. The tragedies of the past, the expectations set by the historically accepted and promoted grand narratives, all weigh down on Nietzsche’s modern man, requiring him to act in accordance with a system of preconceived and sometimes overly rigid ethics.

For Nietzsche, most free from the bonds of history is a child, who enviably “plays in a happy blindness between the walls of the past and the future” (Nietzsche 6). But like the child in *The Road*, the dominance of story places the past forever close to the boy, impinging directly on his free play. That people resign themselves easily to becoming “historical” is a product of the persistence of story, specifically narratives of the past. Looking to history is often a product of modernity’s failures—the ugliness of contemporary society provokes a type of nostalgia or glorification of the past.

In *The Road*, the child’s world strips away the past and destroys the old world that his father once knew. And yet, the unending violence of the new world demands recourse to story, some kind of narrative to shape oneself around. “Are we still the good guys?” the boy asks after the father shoots their attacker. “Yes. We’re still the good guys” (McCarthy 77), the father responds, an affirmation that is repeated several times. Likewise, the boy must assure himself that because they are “carrying the fire” they are going to be “okay” and “nothing bad is going to happen” (McCarthy 83). Each reassurance is like fanning the fire of perseverance—the child returns to the safety of his place in a broader story, what Nietzsche calls a child’s little “kingdom of oblivion” (7). In returning to these narratives constructed by his father, the boy also turns backwards towards a world where nothing bad would happen, where people making the right decisions—carrying the fire of ethical responsibility—would be rewarded, guarded, or blessed in some way by their society. In this way story becomes an opportunity for the son to regain his innocence, to return to a world—albeit a world built on the invented story of his father—where goodness can be a reality.



As the novel progresses, the son becomes less and less sure of the efficacy of his father's stories. He grows aware of the problems associated with calling yourself one of the "good guys" when you shoot people, when you pass by the needy without helping, when you force a man to strip and leave him to die instead of forgiving and helping him. For a child growing more and more accustomed to violence and death, the world's chaos is evidence that the old stories of kindness, compassion, and chivalry are failing. If anything, life on the road has taught him that you have to be willing to do anything to survive—even kill. Again, Chabon writes: "The son has wearied of his father's stories of the past, of deeds of heroism and goodness, of the world that no longer exists—'Those stories are not true,' he complains—but he has none of his own to offer. (114). The father clearly remembers the world before whatever events provoked such chaos. His boy, born just after the destruction began, has no concept of the preapocalyptic world, no memories to return to. As a result, his father's recollections seem foreign and inapplicable, and the boy eventually refuses to listen or to accept them. When asked why he will not listen, the boy responds, "Those stories are not true." His father responds that a story's existence does not depend on its truthfulness. "Yes," the son replies, "But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people" (McCarthy 225). Here the boy demonstrates that his lived experience proves his father's stories to be questionable at best. Chabon explains:

The son copes with the imperfectly understood and erratically imparted legacy of the past that he bears on his thin shoulders, attempting to reconcile the stories his father tells him with what is around him, to square the entire vanished culture and civilization implied by every word of American English that he speaks with the 'cauterized terrain' of the unhistoried world he has inherited. (111)

Over time the son struggles more and more to reconcile his father's story with their decisions along the road, eventually questioning the possibility of them being "good guys," and seems to doubt the possibility of good existing all together. Such old and historical notions are simply erased by the chaos of the present world.

This growing mistrust of story's ability to make sense of his situation is in keeping with Nietzsche's concerns over the effects of history. Emerging from innocence, the child, in the words of Nietzsche, "learns to understand the words 'once upon a time,' the 'open sesame' that lets in battle, suffering, and weariness on mankind and reminds them what their existence really is—an imperfect tense that never becomes present" (6). The boy is beginning to see what his father ignores, that part of their suffering is in reality produced by the need to act in accordance with the dominant ideologies and narratives of the past—to live up to the impossible expectations of history's mythic narratives. In seeing how he and his father consistently fail to live up to the title of "good guys," the boy is increasingly aware of what Paul Ricoeur calls "the suspiciousness of memory" ("Memory and Forgetting" 6), the disease that eats away at a person's sense of identity. In a paper entitled "Memory and Forgetting" published in the book *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, Ricoeur writes:

Most events to do with the founding of any community are acts and events of violence. So we could say that collective identity is rooted in founding events which are violent events. In a sense, collective memory is a kind of storage of such violent blows, wounds and scars. (8)

For Ricoeur, a culture's identity is predicated on the violence of its past. This means that a move back towards historical grand narratives is in fact not a reinvigoration of the present self, but rather a move towards violence and trauma. The boy is aware of this by the end of the novel—that their character is inextricably connected to their ability to kill

and steal in order to survive, that though the past may provide allowances for “good guys,” they present requires all people—no matter their adopted title—to make certain unethical choices.

### Memories of Little Boys

As the novel progresses, the child demonstrates a far different type of recollection than that of his father. While his father is constantly mindful of the need to survive—to beat the odds stacked against them—the son repeatedly returns to moments of death, and dwells on memories of those who have been lost, killed, or abandoned. He is not ashamed to recall times when he and his father have failed. Ricoeur calls for this type of recollection, a process that keeps alive “the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors” (“Memory and Forgetting” 10). This alternate history becomes a way for an individual to pay attention not only to victory but also to loss, to “memorize the victims of history—the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten” (“Memory and Forgetting” 10-11). In effect, such memories of suffering are what can provide the impetus for humility, repentance, and forgiveness. For the boy, the outcome of this type of memory is a growing sense of altruism and compassion, virtues that increasingly frustrate his father who only judges the rightness of an action by its correlation to survival. This is most obvious in the way that the son remembers a little boy that he either sees or thinks he sees. The son wants to backtrack on the road to be able to give the boy half of his food. The father coldly rejects such a possibility, saying: “Stop it. We cant” (86). In the following pages the plot jumps forward slightly in time and we learn that the father thinks that his son does not remember any little boys. The end

of the novel proves this to be false when even as his father is dying the son remembers the little boy, wondering if he's okay. Remarkably, the son's concerns over the well-being of another person on the road provides an opportunity for the father to reaffirm the story he has told his son all along. The son asks: "Who will find the little boy?" The father responds: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281). Here the father returns to his theme of "goodness" in order to one more time shield his son, not only resolving his concerns about the past—what happened to the little boy—but also subtly affirming that, despite the odds, the son will be fine.

Whereas Ricoeur calls the recollection of those who suffer, Nietzsche argues that compassion is not necessarily the specific end goal of recollection, but more broadly that the past should be remembered in order to have an effect on the present. Paradoxically, in order for history to serve in this way, forgetting—even active forgetting—is required. Nietzsche argues that we must be able to leave the present alone—to resist the urge to think of what has already happened or how our accomplishments will alter the future: "One who cannot leave himself behind on the threshold of the moment and forget the past, who cannot stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without fear or giddiness, will never know what happiness is; and worse still, will never do anything to make others happy" (Nietzsche 6). According to Nietzsche, the limits of perspective that history places upon individuals restrict their ability to see and accomplish good. In this way, it is the ability to forget that saves a culture, allowing them to see the "single point" of the present for what it is.

For Nietzsche, as the chain of history is always available to us, we should make use of it somehow—the past should become an instrument used in shaping life, what

takes place in the present. “The knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the present, not to weaken the present or undermine a living future” (Nietzsche 22). If we are to remember, let it be so as to offer a kind of trajectory to follow going forward. For Nietzsche, history must remain a service, not a type of knowledge that becomes an impartial, objective science in the Hegelian sense. Rather, history should always promote “the drive for living.” Ricoeur agrees with this point, explaining that “remembering is a way of *doing* things, not only with words, but with our minds; in remembering or recollecting we are exercising our memory, which is a kind of action” (“Memory and Forgetting” 5). In the face of destruction, Ricoeur’s idea of memory—much like that of Nietzsche—has the ability to alter the present. Specifically, both of these philosophers argue that the past can provide a model for the future—identifying mistakes to avoid, actions to condemn, and temptations to resist.

Like Nietzsche, Ricoeur sees the connection between remembering and forgetting—how the present and past are inevitably intertwined to create narrative. In other words, it is the father’s ability to momentarily forget the hopelessness and horror of their situation that allows him to tell a story that favors goodness and even hope. Ricoeur writes:

The best use of forgetting is precisely in the construction of plots, in the elaboration of narratives concerning personal identity or collective identity; that is, we cannot tell a story without eliminating or dropping some important event according to the kind of plot we intend to build. Narratives, therefore, are at the same time the occasion for manipulation through reading and directing narratives, but also the place where a certain healing of memory may begin. (“Memory and Forgetting” 9)

Ricoeur argues here that forgetting does political work—it eliminates certain elements that lack value to us. In doing so, a narrative—a memory—is created around

which an individual's identity is formed. In his book *Remembering*, philosopher Edward S. Casey writes: "Memory moves us as surely into the realm of what shall be as it moves us back to what has been; by extracting what is indeterminately lasting from the latter, it allows the former to come to us" (279). This move makes it possible to argue that with each passing trauma—every time the boy and his father are forced to do something that might call into question their "goodness," an opportunity arises to reaffirm it. In other words, Casey is arguing for a truth at the heart of religion: The errors of the past can be made up for—the future can bring redemption. "So whereas the traumatic character of past humiliations brings us back permanently towards the past," writes Ricoeur, "the exemplary dimension of the same events is directed towards the future and regulated, 'toward justice', to quote Todorov" ("Memory and Forgetting" 9). Bad guys can be good in time.

The dual effect of memory as both strengthening and weakening the father is echoed in the novel as whole. *The Road* struggles with how to use history, how to put the past to use in telling the story of a world so new and different. As a result, the book sometimes is weakened by a simultaneous pull forward and backward in time. *The Road* seems to move towards a new type of literature, one that goes beyond history to a new world of destruction and violence, a literature that openly engages with the weaknesses of old narratives. And yet, what frustrates many readers is that the novel is simultaneously a very *old* type of story—constantly referencing to religion, most notably the Bible, as well as invoking the themes of classical epics. That the novel in fact becomes a very familiar type of history is indicative of McCarthy's inability to move beyond literature, to make a new kind of fiction. The chain of history binds the author as much as it does his

characters, a book that perhaps more than anything else “evokes the forms” of history’s oldest stories like the Bible and classical epics.

The evocation of the past is perhaps not what would trouble Nietzsche about *The Road*, so much as the way the novel becomes distracted from the story’s present, from the world after the apocalypse. In a way, McCarthy has simply “revised” the concerns and struggles of the old world to fit a postapocalyptic setting, updating these themes but hardly moving beyond them. Like the boy in his novel, McCarthy chooses not to set aside the stories that he simultaneously questions. At the end of the novel the father wonders aloud if his son believes his stories. “I always believe you,” the boy answers, to which his father replies, “I don’t think so.” Finally, the son affirms his belief by saying: “Yes I do. I have to” (McCarthy 185). The son either feels he has no other recourse than to believe his father’s stories, or he does not have the courage to admit that he has moved beyond them. Either way, McCarthy seems to be in a similar situation, choosing not to write the novel in which a son escapes his father’s narrative, the novel that Nietzsche would demand. McCarthy could have written a story in which the son not only points out the weaknesses in historical ideas like “good guys” and “bad guys” but moves beyond them, embracing a type of ethics that does not require conforming to history’s standards.

That *The Road* ends with a story, the description of how “once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains” (286)—is indication that McCarthy has failed to untangle his characters from the web of stories in which they have wrapped themselves. Likewise such a conclusion makes that the deceptively simple claim that memories of fish, streams, words like “once” prevail. While this may seem insignificant, the way that memories remain despite the apocalypse’s violence provides the novel a patina of

hopefulness. Unlike Nietzsche, who demands that if history cannot serve the present it should be done away with, *The Road* is an argument that nothing can do away with history. Even if it fails humanity, if the past gets abused in order to produce ideological regimes and political violence, the past is indestructible—it cannot “be put back” (McCarthy 287).

### The World in Its Becoming

When even on his deathbed the father avows that “goodness will find the little boy,” (McCarthy 281), the unnamed man writes the final chapter of the story that has led his threatened family so far down the road. The story of the “good guys” has given them a purpose and a shield to hide behind—and in one of his final acts the father avows that that story won’t fail them now. McCarthy’s novel is a bleak and difficult story, a wrenching story that often refuses to provide any kind of break or catharsis from the trauma presented. *The Road* may not demonstrate much outright hope that the world will avoid total annihilation in the future, but if anything the book demonstrates a profound faith in the power of story—though not necessarily the power of story to do good. I read this otherwise dark and violent novel as demonstrating a serious hope that story will be one way of resisting what feels like an increasingly inevitable future of death and violence. After all the horrors the reader has been a part of, after the pure terror that the novel’s characters have experienced, what remains is something that reads like a consolation—the memory of trout in a stream, of their look and smell, and even the symbolic resonance of fish. McCarthy’s use of the word “once” to begin this lovely and in many ways comforting story suggests that it is in fact something that happened ages



ago, some kind of final recollection—perhaps the disembodied memory of the deceased father or the lasting legacy that he imparted to his son. The other option is that the use of the word “once” is intended to call to mind myth and fantasy, the record of a creature that seems so foreign so as to be almost part of a fairy tale like narrative. No matter whom this memory belongs to, or what mythic framework it fits into, its placement at the very end of the story gives it a prominence and argues that memory remains even after death.

More specifically, it is significant that McCarthy does not end his novel with a different image—a field covered in ash, a corpse heaped with blankets. This is likely the way that a true existentialist, Beckett for example, would have ended the book. Rather, the final image of the novel is one of life—specifically natural life. Surprisingly, and perhaps to the dismay of hard-core nihilists, *The Road* does not conclude with the complete and total end of the world, but rather an image of “the world in its becoming” (287). This ending requires a significant jump both in time and in place away from the road, away from its destruction, as if the author cannot stand the violence any more and finally feels compelled to look away.

*The Road's* conclusion is an outright avowal of the power of history and of story to resist destruction—to win the wrestling match with time. The way that memory remains at the end of such a bleak and bloodstained story is proof that history has a sublime power to transcend both violence and time. Likewise, what is revealed by McCarthy's apocalypse is the way that stories produce meaning, produce life, and—despite the efforts of those who try to erase them—produce a plausible future for those who believe in them. At the beginning of the book the father tells his son: “Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever” (McCarthy 12). Because

there were once fish in streams there will always be. Because there was once the story of a road—something that, like time, cuts both forwards and backwards—there will always be a road recorded in memory and imagination. Again, this is the power of history to topple time, to extend the life of a person, a place, or a story far into the future. As much as *The Road* is an allegory for the way that our stories fail some of us in the light of chaos, it ends with the unwavering affirmation that narrative has the ability to inspire goodness, beauty, and survival even in the face of death.

## CONCLUSION

### THE ANGEL AND THE STORM

In 1940, Walter Benjamin wrote an essay titled “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” The influential treatise consists of a series of paragraph-long “theses” that express Benjamin’s thoughts on the impact of history on modern life. The ninth of the twenty theses is the description of a painting by Klee of an angel “looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating”:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Arendt 257-258)

Benjamin here describes history as a benevolent-yet-helpless figure, broken by the force of progress. The raging storm tumbles the angel of history forward into a future than he never actually gets to see, as he forever faces toward the past. We get the sense that Benjamin sees history as incapable of resisting the effects of the future, as if history were too weak to prevent the catastrophes of the past from continuing.

In both chapters of this thesis I have argued that art, particularly art grounded in narrative, deals with the tensions existing between the past and future, memory and invention, reflection and anticipation. In both the work of Thomas Cole and Cormac McCarthy we've been able to observe how landscape acts as a canvas for these tensions to be played out upon. Alternatively, we could conclude that landscape is the phenomenon that makes visible such conflicts.

Both Cole and McCarthy illustrate the way that progress can be terrifying in the context of an apocalyptic future, and yet both artists likewise show that sometimes progress is too alluring to resist. Cole, despite being frightened by the vices and eventual destruction that he believes will follow in the wake of economic expansion, nevertheless resigns himself to the inevitability of progress. He even momentarily contradicts his own ideals by conceding that progress—as represented by the glistening plow of frontier America—could have some sanctifying effect on the nation. Like the angel of history, Cole stands at a crucial moment for his country and fearfully tries to turn his back on the future, focusing his attention on a romantic, nostalgic, even wild past. Try as he might to make a claim on the past as an ideal version of American society, the future seems to forcibly snatch away his attention and propel his work into anxious fantasies of what might come from empire's interminable course.

The characters in *The Road* have no future to speak of, and as a result the father and his son make the same desperate move as Cole, trying to turn their backs on the future in order to protect themselves from the seemingly inevitable destruction awaiting them. The father, who actually has a connection to the preapocalypse world, is most successful in the turn backwards, though it comes at a cost. The father uses historically

based narratives—“the good guys,” “carrying the fire” (of hope), even the very premise of moving south—in order to create a set of core beliefs that become the identity of his family, in particular an identity that will propel them towards survival. The cost of such a turn toward the past is that the man constantly has to fight against a debilitating nostalgia that steals his attention from the terrifying demands of the present. Likewise, while ideas like “the good guys” seem inspiring at the beginning of the novel, by the middle of *The Road* the terrifying violence of the apocalyptic world has pointed out the ways that such concepts fail to stand up in moments where ethical choices are unclear. McCarthy’s work poignantly illustrates how the violent storms of a hopeless future bring to light history’s inability to fix the wreckage of a world uncoupled from its ethical shoring. Whereas Cole’s anxiety involved America’s future, the father’s anxiety in *The Road* centers on how to most appropriately and effectually reconstruct and use the past. At the same time, McCarthy tries to engage with a new kind of storytelling—one that disengages itself from literary and historical norms. In the end, however, the novel proves even in its own literary construction how difficult it is to achieve an ahistorical art, let alone an ahistorical life.

Despite being separated by nearly two centuries, both *The Course of Empire* and *The Road* anticipate the American apocalypse and do so in a way that makes it seem less an invention than inevitability. Interestingly, both narratives seem to end in the same way: a scene of natural beauty, surprising and somewhat troubling in its loveliness considering its apocalyptic context. Both Cole’s scene of plant and animal life regenerating among the ruins of his imagined landscape and McCarthy’s scene of silent, shimmering, brook trout evoke the possibility that either in reality or in memory, history

has a way of repeating itself—that history runs on a cycle. Cole’s series leaves the impression that nature can literally return to a landscape once civilization has crumbled. But *The Road* suggests that any kind of verdant or pastoral natural scene can only be restored to a landscape through the inventive capacity of memory.

Both chapters of this analysis illustrate the ways that landscape reveals important cultural anxieties. Likewise, both of the examples I have examined show the ways that throughout its existence America has envisioned its future, most specifically the way that artists have imagined and even anticipated the nation’s apocalyptic end. It would seem that when an American artist begins to think about the end of the world, inevitably certain tensions, if not contradictions, arise. Most notably, the anxieties at root in the apocalyptic imagination seem to be between the past, present, and future as well as between the wild and the domesticated. In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama argues that these tensions are unavoidable, especially considering the way that our imaginations endow the very land we live upon with a wide range of symbolic meanings. He writes:

It seems to me that neither the frontiers between the wild and the cultivated, nor those that lie between the past and the present, are so easily fixed. Whether we scramble the slopes or ramble the woods, our Western sensibilities carry a bulging backpack of myth and recollection....And though it may sometimes seem that our impatient appetite for produce has ground the earth to thin and shifting dust, we need only poke below the subsoil of its surface to discover an obstinately rich loam of memory. (574)

From Cole, McCarthy, and now Schama we learn that we carry our individual and cultural recollections with us wherever we go, and we shape each experience and each landscape using the rough tools of our memories. In light of our current cultural moment, both chapters of this thesis are relevant landscapes to keep in mind. At a time when America already matches the scene in *The Consummation of Empire* and is steadily

moving in the direction of scenes recorded in *The Road*, perhaps now more than ever do we need to understand the ways that we look at the American landscape. Such realizations will only help us make the hard but necessary ethical decisions our moment in history demands. I have argued in this thesis that landscapes are a cultural construction—an artificial medium that attempts to signify in certain ways. Disappointing as it may seem, the human condition is such that our imagination is constantly at work in reshaping the natural world in meaningful ways, a reality that I think should be celebrated more than mourned. Luckily for us, it is the imaginative quality of our memory that processes history into a chain of events and not the continual catastrophe that Benjamin's angel faces. The danger to be conscious of is that the reshaping of the landscape inevitably performs ideological work that accepts particular cultures or ideals and in turn leads to the exclusion and sometimes violent expulsion of others. Empire's course requires a particular use—and perhaps abuse—of memory. In turn, the storms of progress use memory to shape a landscape in a way that affects the way we inhabit the world. Resistance may be impossible. Our wings may be too broken to turn away from the catastrophes of the past. But if we do, it will be in part because of the art of memory applied to life.

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